MARGERY MORRIS
in the PINE WOODS

VIOLET GORDON GRAY

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ONLY DEBORAH DAVIS HAD BEEN ALLOWED TO SEE HER.

MARGERY MORRIS
IN
THE PINE WOODS

By

VIOLET GORDON GRAY

Author of "Margery Morris"
"Margery Morris, Mascot"
"Margery Morris and Plain Jane"
"Margery Morris in the Pine Woods"

Illustrated by

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Margery Morris in the Pine Woods

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Introduction

THE first book of this set, "Margery Morris," told of a young girl who lived in a quaint, old Quaker town in New Jersey, of the friends she made, of the fun and mishaps she had, and the great surprise which came to her at the end.

The second book, "Margery Morris, Mascot," tells of the winter and spring following the events in the first book. Margery wanted to do something useful; in fact, she wanted a career, and decided upon the unassuming one of "mascot" so that she might bring all the happiness she could to the lives of others. Unfortunately, this was not such an easy thing to do, and her good intentions very often brought embarrassment and difficulty. She continued to try, however, until when she was about ready to give away to despair a final resolution to play the game brought success and happiness once more.

The third book, "Margery Morris and Plain Jane," relates Margery's experiences while spending the summer at the beautiful resort of Wyanoke, where she lived a very happy and wholesome out-of-door life, surrounded by her friends. Among these is a new friend, Jane Gale or "Plain Jane" as she calls herself, who has suffered from a keen disappointment. Margery helps her to a more normal view of life, but when the shadow of tragedy creeps near them, they both learn some truths and a new peace and happiness.

"Margery Morris in the Pine Woods" deals particularly with Margery's recovery from a serious illness, and the manner in which she employed her time while recuperating in the Pine Woods. She thought she knew what it was to be an American, but she found a greater and broader meaning while teaching citizenship to the children of that out-of-the-way spot.

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Margery Morris in the Pine Woods

CHAPTER I

CHRISTMAS GREENS

In a group of tall trees by the roadside the crows flocked, black against a cloudless, ice-blue sky. Beyond the dull gray fences where the bittersweet still wreathed its orange-red berries, the fields stretched brown and sere to the distant pine-forest.

" How wintry and cold those crows sound," said Margery Morris, drawing the fur collar of her coat closer around her throat. " Hear them? Caw! Caw! "

" It is cold," admitted Dick Ball, thrusting his feet deeper into the straw that filled the bottom of the little motor-truck. " It will be warmer when we get into the woods and away from this wind. Turn down the first lane to the right, Mr. Morris," he called to Margery's father at the wheel. " That will bring us into the barrens sooner."

" All right, boss," answered big, boyish Mr. Morris, " I'll take your word for it."

Mrs. Morris, sitting beside her husband, turned her charming head and looked back at the young people crouched in the bottom of the little motor-truck used at the White House Farm to carry supplies to and from the town. It was five days before Christmas and they were going into that great stretch of the pine-forest known as the barrens to gather Christmas greens. The three girls, Margery and her chums, Polly Jameson and Esther Crowell, had been up since a little after the wintry dawn, making sandwiches and packing tea-baskets, for they were to build a camp-fire and have their luncheon deep in the woods. The boys, Sam Bennet and Dick, had newly sharpened axes and knives, and Dick had even borrowed a pair of linesman's creepers from the electric light station in the hope that at the top of some ancient black-gum tree he might spy the white berries and silvery gray leaves of the mistletoe. There were all kinds of Christmas treasures to be found in the barrens: mistletoe and laurel; juniper and the trailing ground-pine and scarlet holly; the crimson fruits of ilex and black alder, and the flaming beads of the winterberry, partridge and teaberries, wine-red and coral.

Margery took off her big scarlet tam-o'-shanter and settled it more securely on her blond curls. "See those juncos, Mother?" she called, leaning forward to draw her mother's attention to a flock of slate-colored birds that with a crisp, frosty 'tsip call of alarm, rose from a clump of small cedars.

Mrs. Morris nodded rather absently. She was thinking of the radiantly happy and healthy appearance of the boys and girls. The keen wind had stung Margery's cheeks to as gay a red as her tam-o'-shanter; Esther, always round and rosy, had found in one of the famous camphor-wood chests of her great-grandmother an old-fashioned quilted sleighing hood that turned her into the most delightful of little old ladies; while Polly, always fine-looking in her individual fashion, was characteristically stunning in a great brown mackinaw and close brown cap that matched in color her big, intelligent brown eyes.

"They seem so happy," Mrs. Morris said softly to her husband, "that one feels as though they never could be burdened by sorrow and care and ill-health. Yet we know it must come sometime to some of them, if not to all. If there were only some way to shield them," she added with a sigh.

Mr. Morris slowed down the car and glanced over his shoulder at his beloved little daughter and at Dick sitting beside her, big and blond and self-reliant. "Those broad shoulders of Dick's," he said, "look as though they could carry pretty heavy burdens. And as for Margery!—well, she has plenty of grit to help her along! And Sam," turning further to glance at Sam crouched on the other side of Margery, "will always be a cheerful soul, I imagine, blundering into one scrape after another, but as cheerful and cherubic and apple-cheeked at forty as he is now." He looked at his pretty young wife, whose perplexities and doubts and enthusiasms always amused him, and laughed. "So don't begin to worry about the future of these young people just yet," he said. "You'll have another problem to meet before that, a pressing one. That is: how are we going to be able to cook enough over a camp-fire to feed all those hungry young ravens? Sam looks as though he could eat the entire contents of the lunch-basket—and this air has made me as hungry as a hunter."

The narrow road grew sandy and crept in among the scrub-oaks, low cedars and dwarf pitch-pines that marked the outer portions of the pine-barrens. At the sound of the car there was a whirring of wings and the juncos and pine-siskins, chickadees and cedar waxwings that had been feasting on the red berries of the dogwood and dwarf sumac, rose with startled cries and flew off.

"The birds are getting their Christmas dinner when they can," remarked Dick; "if a heavy snow should come they wouldn't have such an easy time."

"Oh, look, Dick," cried Margery, her eyes big with disappointment, "look, the frost has spoiled all the holly—see how horrid and black it is!"

The others laughed. "You're a fine country girl," declared Dick, delighted to have found a fresh subject with which to tease Margery. "That isn't holly—that's inkberry. It always looks that way. It's a poor relation of the holly. You used to want a career—there's one for you. We'll make you a naturalist."

Margery was too used to Dick's teasing to pay any attention to it. "All right," she said resignedly. "I'll be a naturalist or anything else you may select, just so long as it isn't a mascot."

The character of the woods began to change; the dwarf pitch-pines and lowly scrub-oaks gave way to tall silver-maples, great oaks and cedars, and yellow pines, and here and there in the swampy places a giant black-gum reared its ancient branches. Dick eagerly scanned the upper limbs in search of mistletoe.

Deeper and deeper into the forest wound the narrow sandy road; sheltered from the keen wind it seemed warmer and the air was fragrant with the aromatic breath of the pines and cedars. Except for the cries of the birds and the musical soughing of the pine-trees there was no sound.

"There is fine holly," said Mr. Morris and pointing to a thicket where brilliant-berried holly and glossy-leaved laurel grew together.

"Pile out, kids, and get to work. There's all the ground-pine you can want over there among those pines, too."

"Did you ever see such treasures?" cried Polly, as she jumped down from the truck. "There's holly and laurel and ground-pine! Dick, do lend me that axe! And look, Margery, in that ring of pines, see, where the white sand is! Aren't all those creeping vines pretty?"

Brandishing her axe, Polly ran to the clearing, where she began to cut great branches of holly, bravely disregarding the sharp spikes that pierced her woollen gloves.

Margery, humming cheerfully to herself, wandered away to a little clearing where the ground-pine and partridgeberry grew. She felt very happy there in the silent woods. Getting her fingers under the roots and stems of the ground-pine she pulled carefully, and brought up a great chain of it some eight feet long. Still humming, she knocked off the black leaf-mold with its clean earthy smell that clung to the tiny stems and roots.

"This will be perfect to put around the fireplaces for my party," she thought, bending over to pull up another long strand. She was to have a dance on Christmas night, when her grandfather's country home with its big hospitable rooms was to be thrown open to the boys and girls of Renwyck's Town. With the exception of the party, Christmas at the White House Farm was to be very simple, for it was the first year of the war, and Mr. and Mrs. Morris had decided that all their money and energy must be spent in answer to the call for relief that came from suffering Belgium and France.

Looping the ground-pine over her arm, she turned back and began to pick clusters of the gay little red partridgeberries shining amid their round bright green leaves.

Through the trees she could see her mother's fur toque and coat, and Polly's brown mackinaw, and half eager to show the others her treasures, half reluctant to leave the solitude of the little clearing, she made her way toward them.

She found them standing at the edge of a fairy ring of tall yellow pines that clustered about the patch of shining white sand. They were watching with amusement a chattering red squirrel that, perched on the branch of a tree, was busily shredding a pine-cone.

"Shh," whispered Mrs. Morris. "Isn't it fun to watch him?"

Margery slipped her arm through Polly's and they stood silently looking at the pretty little animal until Esther and the boys, bearing great branches of pine and laurel, came laughing and talking to the edge of the sandy circle, and the squirrel darted up the tree and disappeared among the upper branches.

"Hear the wind in the pine-trees, isn't it perfect?" remarked Polly, looking up at the great trees. "If I were a millionaire, instead of having exactly fourteen dollars and fifty-three cents to my name, I'd build a house in the woods and I'd call it 'Forest Murmurs.' I think they are the most beautiful words in the English language."

"I think 'Running Waters' are prettier," declared Margery, her eyes on the little cedar-water stream that slipped silently along its sandy bed beyond the edge of the pine-cluster.

"Some Frenchman said 'cellar-door' is the most beautiful word in the English language," remarked Esther. "It is beautiful if you just listen to the sound, and don't stop to think of the meaning."

"'Dinner time' is the most beautiful pair of words to me," suggested Sam.

"You're right, Sam," agreed Mr. Morris, who had come up back of them. "That is the way I feel at this present moment. And I don't think we could find a better place for our camp-fire than just this sand-wash with its good dry sand. We can get all the water we want from that little stream. Spread out your rugs, Margery-Pargery-Pudding-and-Pie. Come on, Dick, let's start the fire. Some of that old fallen pine over there ought to make good fire-wood. Go to it with your axe! Come on, everybody—wake up, and get to work! Don't stand dreaming there, Margery Daw! Wake up and hear the birdies sing!"

Margery disrespectfully aimed a pine-cone at her father which hit Esther, who was back of her, instead, and laughing and chattering, the girls brought the rugs from the car and spread them out on the dry white sand, and opened up the lunch-baskets, while Dick chopped at the pine-stump, and Mr. Morris and Sam brought dead branches of laurel and some blueberry bushes, both of which burn with a fierce heat.

"Now then, Margery and Esther," commanded Mr. Morris, as Dick heaped up the pine-wood beside the laurel branches, "we are all ready, except for some dead leaves, and some super-dry pine-needles."

Over the heap of dead leaves and pine-needles which the girls brought, Dick built a little tent of blueberry twigs, then on top of that laid the laurel and berry bushes. "Fire's all ready to light," he announced.

"We ought to have rubbed two sticks together, Indian fashion," remarked Mr. Morris, as he started the fire and the dead leaves and laurel branches blazed up quickly. "Now then, Dick, where are your pieces of pine-stump?"

As the pine-stump burned with a dull-red, intense glow, Margery carefully placed the picnic-rack, an iron gridiron with four strong legs, over the fire and balanced the coffee-pot on it.

"Isn't it wonderful," laughed Mrs. Morris as she fastened a sausage on the end of a stick and stuck it into the glowing embers, "how delicious food cooked and eaten out of doors is? Imagine our eating such a meal as this at home! Oh, there goes my sausage—right off the stick into the fire!"

Margery hastily put down the can of condensed milk, and with another stick tried to rescue the sausage.

"It's burnt to a flinder," she wailed at last, backing off with scarlet face and smoke-filled eyes. "And we simply can't afford to lose one single sausage, either! Gracious, isn't it hot by this fire? No one would ever think it was December! Oh, look, Dick," waving her arm in the direction of a downy little black and gray bird clinging upside down to the tip of a pine-branch. "Look, there's a chickadee!"

The little bird twirled itself over like an acrobat, perched right side up on the end of an outstretched twig, and called in clear, twinkling notes, "Chick-a-dee, chick-a-dee!"

Dick, scorching himself over the fire, rescued the coffee-pot from upsetting, and glanced up. "Yes, it's a chickadee," he said. "There are probably more in the trees. They are inquisitive little chaps. Perhaps I can bring some more to view."

Putting the coffee-pot carefully back on the fire, he began to whistle, " Chick-a-dee, chick-a-dee-dee."

The little bird hopped to a nearer branch. " Chick-a-dee, chick-a-dee-dee," whistled Dick again.

There was a fluttering in the nearest pine and two more little black and gray birds appeared. " See," said Dick triumphantly.

" Oh, how interesting, Dick," cried Mrs. Morris. " I wish I could know half what you do about the birds and trees and flowers. In the meantime, while I am learning, I'll tell you that I do know something else. It's a Christmas secret that may or may not come true."

" Oh, Mother! What? " cried Margery.

Mrs. Morris shook her head. " I can't tell," she insisted. " I don't even know myself whether it will come true or not."

" But tell us—tell us! " demanded the boys and girls.

But Mrs. Morris only laughed. " Oh, no, I can't."

" When will you know? " persisted Margery. " You might tell us that much! Please, Mother, do."

Her mother obdurate, Margery turned to her father. "Now, Papa, you know. I'm sure you do. You look so guilty."

Mr. Morris laughed, that big, booming, boyish laugh that helped to make him so popular with the boys and girls. "I simply wouldn't dare to tell you—even if I happened to know. Think what your mother might do to me. Look at that bird," pointing to a nuthatch running down the trunk of a tree head foremost. "Look at that pine-needle Polly is about to swallow with the piece of fudge she is eating. Look at anything that will distract your attention and keep you from asking your aged parent questions."

The last crumbs of the walnut-cake Esther had brought were eaten, the spoons had been washed in the little stream, and the wooden picnic plates had been fed into the fire, but still the little party sat grouped about the glowing embers. There in the sand-wash, sheltered from the winter wind by the tall, whispering pines, shone on by the winter sunshine and warmed by the fire, they were too comfortable to think just yet of moving on. Beyond the circle of pines stretched the forest, with here and there in the open spaces, where some great tree had fallen, clumps of laurel and holly, and along the little brook, scarlet-berried alder.

"Can't you just imagine that the wind in the pine-trees is the sound of the ocean," said Polly, closing her eyes and leaning back luxuriously against Margery.

"There is an old Indian legend," said Dick, "that when the ocean receded after having been all over the earth, the mountains felt so lonely that they asked the Great Spirit to send them back the waters. As that couldn't be done, the pine-trees were sent to them to sound like the ocean and so bring them comfort."

"I'd like to spend the rest of the day here," said Mr. Morris, "but I suppose that if we are going to look for mistletoe we must be on our way. Get some water, boys, and we'll put out this fire."

"Now, Papa," ordered Margery, as the boys threw water on the fire, "when we get started again we must keep right on until we find a balsam fir for our Christmas tree."

Mr. Morris and Dick laughed.

"What's the joke?" Margery demanded. "I don't see anything to laugh at."

"You've set your father a good long ride, and a cold one," Dick explained. "Balsams don't grow here—they grow up in the New England mountains, and other places pretty far north."

"Oh, dear," cried Margery, disappointed, "what can we get then?"

"Pines, cedars and hemlocks."

"Never mind, Snooks," consoled her father. "I've already ordered the finest balsam that shall come to town to be saved for us."

"I want to get a tiny pine-tree," said Mrs. Morris, "for the dining-room table."

"I want a baby cedar-tree," declared Polly. "It comes already trimmed with cedar-berries. That's a thrifty thought when you are giving your last cent to the Belgians. And I have to have something to console me while I wait for Mrs. Morris to tell the Christmas secret."

CHAPTER II

IN THE PINE WOODS

Deeper and deeper into the still, mysterious forest went the happy little party, until at length the road skirted the head of a sombre, silent swamp where the great-boled, black gum trees lifted their branches. Suddenly there was a clear, wild whistle, followed by a flash through the alders, and a cardinal grosbeak, like a flame of scarlet, shot down from a tall tree to a tangle of greenbrier.

"Look," cried Margery, as her eyes followed the bird's flight. "Look, what's that? It looks white. See, some bird has lined its nest with white feathers."

"Look again," cried Dick, excitedly. "It's mistletoe. See—there are the tiny green leaves and the white berries. I'm going up after it."

Mrs. Morris demurred when she saw how high above the ground the mistletoe was growing, but Dick fastened on his linesman's creepers and began the climb up the straight old tree-trunk.

"Look out," he cried from the top, "I'm going to throw it down. It's a big bunch."

There was a rustling and the mistletoe fell at Margery's feet. "Oh, Mother," she cried, as she picked it up, "think of being able to pick our own holly and mistletoe! What lots of fun people miss when they just buy things in stores, instead of getting them for themselves."

After Dick came down from his tree-top, they scattered around the edge of the swamp in search of more mistletoe. Slowly the sun began to fade and the sky that had showed so brilliantly blue between the tall trees turned gray.

"Don't you think, dear," suggested Mrs. Morris as her husband came back to the truck with a fresh load of holly in his arms, "that it is getting rather late? Remember, darkness comes down early these December afternoons—especially in this dense forest. Wouldn't we better be starting for home?"

Mr. Morris cocked his head and looked at the sky. "Hmm," he answered, "it does look a little like snow. And we have a pretty long way to go. Well, as soon as I can gather those youngsters together we'll start. Dick is risking his precious neck again for the sake of a piece of mistletoe, and Margery is like a rabbit in a patch of teaberries she has found. To tell the truth, if there had been many rabbits with her appetite for teaberries, she wouldn't be finding so many now."

"Oh, do get her," cried Margery's mother anxiously. "I ate too many teaberries once when I was a child, and I can remember yet how ill I was."

Mr. Morris laughed and disappeared through a thicket of laurel. Margery he found on her knees in a little patch of gray-green reindeer moss, that was flecked by the crimson fruit and bronzed leaves of the teaberries. Her father paused to watch her and to think with pardonable pride what a pretty picture she made with her scarlet tam-o'-shanter cocked on one side of her blond head.

"You look like a teaberry yourself, Angel-lamb," he called. It seemed as though Mr. Morris could never find enough pet names for his adored only daughter. Every day he invented new ones, and his flights of fancy, ranging from Honey-bunch-of-onions to Moss-rosebud-of-my-heart, were a constant source of amusement to Margery's friends.

At her father's summons, Margery sprang up and hurried to join him. "Just look," she said, showing him the big pocket of her coat. "See, I have both pockets nearly full. Kiley told me to be sure to bring home some teaberries. I think that even Kiley ought to be pleased."

Kiley, the cross old cook who ruled the kitchen at the White House Farm, was not an easy person to keep in good humor.

Her hand tucked in her father's, Margery went with him along a narrow white sand path to the foot of another tall gum-tree, where the others stood clustered watching Dick make the long and somewhat perilous descent from its upper branches. "Look," said Polly, picking up a big bunch of mistletoe, "isn't this another beauty?"

The truck was so full now with the little pine and cedar-trees and branches of pine and holly and mistletoe, as well as bay and laurel and the long ropes of ground-pine, that the young people found some trouble in tucking themselves in.

"And once having gotten ourselves in," laughed Margery as they were settled at last and Mr. Morris had cranked the car, "the problem will be—how are we ever to get ourselves out? Dick, no matter what marvel of an Indian relic you may happen to see for your collection, you are not to get out and get it. If you do you'll just have to run along behind the truck like a little dog, for we never could make room in here for you again."

"Yes, ma'am. Just as you say, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am," murmured Dick with ostentatious meekness. "Very soon it will be too dark for me to see anything at all, ma'am."

"Sing, you children," ordered Mr. Morris, as he guided the car carefully over the long tree roots that ridged the sandy road and made it rough.

Obediently, Margery began "Twickenham Ferry," the song that they had all sung so much the summer before, and the others joined in. The "Spanish Cavalier" and all the other old favorites followed, and then, very softly, Esther started "It's a long way to Tipperary."

After Tipperary they all were silent. It was the first year of the war, and the song meant a good deal to them just then. Dick and Sam were thinking of the boys not much older than they who were going out bravely to the horror of the trenches, and wishing, as boys will, that they could go too. Mr. and Mrs. Morris were silent, for the war seemed very real and close to them. They had travelled a good deal in their youthful days, and they knew so well those little towns, once so quaint and charming, that had fallen under the German guns, and Mr. Morris, who had spent a year or two at an English school, had already lost friends who were dear to him. Margery, too, felt sombre, and slipped her hand into Esther's red-mittened one. She was thinking of the French and Belgian girls, and wondering how she would feel if she had to say good-bye to her father, her handsome, boyish, jolly, young father. Involuntarily, she glanced at him to assure herself that he was still there.

The twilight deepened and the shadows of the tall pines grew black and mysterious. Without the sunshine the forest was cold and damp, and the wind rose, icy and cutting.

Margery shivered and crouched deeper into the straw. Since the summer before when she had been nearly drowned she was susceptible to changes of temperature and suffered a good deal from the cold. Mr. Morris turned on the lamps of the car, and from the brilliant shaft of light the forest seemed to draw back, dark and menacing. Suddenly there came a tremolo cry, weird and mysterious, from the woods at the right.

Margery shrieked.

Her father threw on the brakes and stopped the car. " Margery," he expostulated, " what is the matter with you? "

" It's that noise," gasped Margery. " Listen! "

Again the cry came, long, wavering, mournful.

Dick and Sam laughed. " It's only a screech-owl. Cheer up."

Mr. Morris turned the car, and the long shaft of light from the search-lights lit up the woods. On the branch of a pine-tree near by they could see a little reddish-brown owl with round, blinking, yellow eyes and tufted ears.

" There it is, Margery," said her father.

"A screech-owl. Screech-owl is a poor name for it. It has the sweetest cry of all the night birds."

"Not for me," demurred Margery. "It's too weird."

Mr. Morris started the car again and they went on. The low plaintive cry followed them.

"It's so cold," sighed Margery wearily to Esther. "I'm almost frozen. I wonder if we will ever get out of these lonely woods."

The pine-trees grew smaller at last and the scrub-oaks began to take their places. "How strange it is," said Mrs. Morris suddenly, "that bush in front of us keeps moving. I don't understand it."

"Where?" asked Mr. Morris. "I don't see any bush that's moving."

"There. In front of us to the right."

"That isn't a bush. That's a man or boy carrying a tree—or some branches."

A few seconds brought them through the dusk to a boy of ten or twelve carrying a load of holly branches.

At the coming of the car he had cowered into the bushes, plainly frightened. Mr. Morris stopped and called to him. Whimpering with cold and nervousness he came forward and said something.

"What? What did you say?" asked Mr. Morris.

"He's an Italian," put in Margery's mother. "Perhaps I can talk to him."

She spoke to him in Italian. "He says," she explained, "that he came into the woods to get holly to sell. He's lost and frightened now, and he tried to hide from us, because he was afraid that we might be bad people. We had better take him along."

A place was made for the boy at her feet, and they started on again. Lower and lower grew the underbrush, and at length they were out of the barrens into the open country. A faint afterglow, dusky gold and amber, touched the horizon, and above it the sky was apple green, lighted by a little crescent moon. Near it, silvery gold, was Venus, the beautiful winter evening star.

The road was smooth and Mr. Morris ran the car swiftly.

At the first small hamlet they passed the Italian boy pulled at Mrs. Morris's skirt and asked to be let down. With amusement they watched him scuttle away in the direction of a tumble-down, little shack, too happy to get home to remember to say "thank you" or "good-bye."

The country grew less lonely and they began to pass comfortable, well-lighted homesteads.

"Well," said Esther, as they drew near a big farmhouse where the lights shone out cheerily over the road, "I am glad to get out of those dark woods. They made me feel rather eerie."

"It seems like life," remarked Polly, who dearly loved to philosophize. "We have to go through some dark and lonely spot now and then. But if we just keep on, we're certain to come out into the open with the old moon and stars to welcome us."

"Some people never get out of their woods," said Mrs. Morris, turning round, "for they lose courage and collapse."

"It seems to me," added Dick, thoughtfully, "that it isn't enough just to get yourself out of the woods—you ought to find something worth while when you are in them."

"You've got to find holly and mistletoe, in fact," put in Margery.

"Exactly," cried Polly. "And you've got to have sense enough not to pick the poisonous berries of discontent and envy."

"You're right, Polly," said Mr. Morris, joining in the conversation. "That's a sensible little head of yours. And beyond all that, we have to recognize that we can't find some of the treasures we want without going into the woods for them. We have to have sorrow and hardship to progress to better things. Just as that famous prima donna lacked some quality in her voice, which kept her from being a success. When she had a real sorrow, the missing quality grew and she achieved great fame."

"And it seems to me," said Esther, "that when you are in the woods you ought to do some good to people. Just as Mrs. Morris picked up that little Italian boy."

"And also," laughed Margery, forestalling a teasing remark she knew was trembling on Dick's lips, "you oughtn't to get scared and screech at the screech-owls."

CHAPTER III

CHRISTMAS PLANS

MARGERY loved the big, comfortable white house with its stately pillared portico and long roomy wings where her grandfather lived. She had spent the previous winter there while her parents were travelling in Japan and this autumn after Mr. and Mrs. Morris's return they had all lived there happily together. But much as she loved it, it had never seemed so homelike or delightful as it did when the truck turned in at the gate and she saw the lights from the windows streaming out over the lawn and the dark box-bordered garden.

Within doors, she knew, were roaring fires in the fireplaces, and in the kitchen Kiley, the cross old cook, would be busy preparing dinner. There would be fried chicken from the home poultry yard, and sweet potatoes and crisp white celery from the garden and, perhaps, if Kiley were in a good humor, a black walnut cake from the nuts that grew on the big tree by the garage. And after dinner Margery and Polly would pop corn over the open fire in the dining-room.

The Christmas greens were put in the stable, then Mr. Morris cranked up the car again to take the others home and to stop in the village for his evening paper. Polly was to spend the night with Margery, as she often did, for the friendship between the two girls, begun over a year ago, had steadily grown until now they were almost inseparable. Arm in arm, they walked around the house to the front door. Far down the driveway close to the gate they could see gleaming through the dusk the red light at the rear of the truck.

"Polly, stop talking," Margery suddenly commanded. "They are singing."

The truck had stopped by the gate and across the dim lawn sounded the boyish voices, aided by Mr. Morris's clear true barytone.

"Good-night, ladies! Good-night, ladies! Good-night, ladies!
We're going to leave you now.
Merrily we roll along, roll along, roll along,
Merrily we roll along,
O'er the deep blue sea."

The singing stopped and the truck started again. The girls opened the door and went in. Mrs. Morris was already in the library speaking to Margery's stately white-haired grandfather, who sat by the fireplace, a book on his knee.

Shivering a little, Margery tossed off her coat and tam-o'-shanter and kneeling before the fire held out her hands to the blaze. Her mother looked at her anxiously. "Margery," she said, "I'm afraid that you were not dressed warmly enough to-day. You know that I told you to take an extra sweater."

"I haven't caught a bit of cold, Mother, really I haven't," Margery insisted.

Nevertheless, when she and Polly went up to dress for dinner, Margery took down from the wardrobe a wine-colored velveteen trimmed with dark fur.

"What are you putting on your best dress for?" asked Polly, pausing with her hair half plaited. "There isn't anybody coming this evening, is there?"

"It's the warmest thing I have. Besides, it looks cosy."

"It does that," Polly agreed.

"Did I tell you," asked Margery, sitting down on the floor to change her shoes, "that this room is to be redecorated for me this spring? We'd have it done now if it wasn't that we are afraid it might mean too many open doors and windows and draughts for Grandpapa."

"Then you're really going to live here, Margie? Goodie!"

"Yes. Isn't it great? It's been decided that Papa will have an office in the East. Of course, after this winter we may live in Philadelphia or New York, but anyway, it won't ever be so far away from Grandpapa as it was before. And he really is too frail for us to transplant him out to California. He wouldn't be happy away from here, either. This is his native heath."

Polly enjoyed dining at the White House Farm, especially now that Margery's parents were spending the winter there. The talk that flew across the big candle-lit table was always fascinating to the bright, book-loving girl. But to-night the minds of the older people were on the war and they seemed rather depressed. The news in the evening paper that Mr. Morris had brought back from the village had not been encouraging.

" Dear me," sighed Mrs. Morris, " to think of all the suffering in the world this Christmas. I'm afraid that it will be bad enough right here in Renwyck's Town."

The products of the factories on the outskirts of the town formerly had been sold chiefly in Europe, and now because of conditions on the other side of the Atlantic, they were shut down and the workers thrown out of employment. With Polly's mother and several others of the Renwyck's Town women, Mrs. Morris had been working hard to provide for the unfortunate families.

" It will be hard on the kiddies," said Polly, who was especially fond of children. " I wish that we could have one big Christmas tree and invite them all."

" You can."

" How, Mother? " asked Margery.

"A ' tree of light.' Just as they are having illuminated Christmas trees, or ' trees of light,' in New York and other cities and towns. We might have that great big spruce tree in the Market Square strung with electric lights and have it lighted on Christmas Eve and have someone to sing old Christmas songs," cried Mrs. Morris, enthusiastic at once about anything that would help others.

Mr. Morris, who often had to restrain his wife's enthusiasms, asked, "Who will sing? If you are thinking of rigging me up in green tights and a red nose in imitation of an Old English waiter, please consider that I have already declined!"

Mrs. Morris laughed. "Yes, I'm afraid we'll be depending on a broken reed if we look to you."

"I'll sing," volunteered Margery.

"You, you blessed little pumpkin pie, why, your little pipe couldn't be heard ten feet," exclaimed her father laughing, flipping a salted almond across the table at her.

Mrs. Morris put out her hand. "Harry," she protested, "how can I bring Margery up properly when you do such things?"

"Never mind, Mother," said Margery tranquilly, "he hasn't succeeded in spoiling me yet. Think what a model of behavior I am. Now as to the singing. Polly will help me, and we'll get Dick and Sam and Esther, and Sally and

Billy and—and all the others. And you can help too. We'll get up a choir."

"Yes, you can do that," agreed her father.

Mrs. Morris was delighted. "That's just the idea—we'll get all the young people to sing. We'll have to work hard to learn anything by Christmas, but still it can be done. And I wasn't going to tell you my Christmas surprise just yet, but I believe I will. I have asked the Watkins to come with Jane and Marion and the three boys to spend Christmas with us. I've had a good deal of correspondence about it, and to-day when I came back from the woods I found a telegram from Mrs. Watkins saying that they can come. Jack and Perry have good voices and their singing will be a great help."

"Oh!" cried Polly. "Jane and Perry and Jack here! Did you ever hear of anything so perfect?"

Margery sank back in her chair and gazed at her mother. "Mother, how did you manage to think of anything so wonderful? You're the most perfect little mother."

Margery had spent the summer at Wyanoke, on the New England coast, where her grandfather had rented a cottage for the season. There she had met Jane Gale and her step-brothers, Perry and Jack Watkins, and had helped Jane to become reconciled to the step-father and brothers whom she had resented so bitterly at the beginning of the summer. There, too, tragedy had come very close to Margery; caught out at sea in an open boat she had been rescued just in time, while the girl with her was lost. To Perry Watkins she owed her life, for it was his courage and strength that had kept her struggling in the cold, storm-swept ocean until help had arrived.

"Mayn't we begin practising the carols to-night?" asked Margery as she rose from the table.

"No, honey," answered her mother. "We're all too sleepy after our day in the woods. Do you know," looking out of the window, "it's beginning to snow!"

It was still snowing the next morning when they all went into the village to service in the quaint old church of St. Peter's. There after church Margery and Polly had an opportunity to speak to Dick and explain the plan to him. He was enthusiastic and promised to get into touch with some of the boys whom Margery felt she did not know well enough to invite.

"And shall I come out later this afternoon then?" asked Polly as she got out of the car with her bag at the door of her comfortable old brick home that stood with other old-fashioned houses in one of the quiet streets of Renwyck's Town.

" I won't be much help in the singing line," Polly's tunelessness was a favorite joke, " but I'll help along in the enthusiasm."

After dinner Margery went into the little study at the back of the house, where her grandfather's collection of Indian relics was kept. Because of the war and the fact that the Morrises were giving so largely to the needy everywhere it had been decided that they should give in the family only simple home-made presents. For her grandfather, Margery was making a card catalogue of his Indian collection. Dick, who had picked up an unusual knowledge of the former Indian inhabitants of the country round about, was helping her.

Twilight was already softly gray across the silent snowy fields when Margery spied Dick driving in by the back way. She ran to the door that opened from the study onto a small porch and stood waiting to let him in as he came up from the stable.

" Oh, Dick," she exclaimed. " I'm so glad you've come. I'm having a dreadful time with my cataloguing! I don't know what half these things are."

" Here, Margery," commanded Dick, " hold out your hand. As I came along the back road I found these hanging on a tree. Old Mrs. Possum must have gotten the rest. These were all that were left, so I brought them to you."

From the pocket of his ulster he carefully drew out four or five dull-orange persimmons, that kept by the frost and cold had not decayed but had been preserved with a candied, wild-woodsy flavor.

" Do you remember your first persimmons? " he asked as he threw his coat down on the sofa and, going to the glass case that held the major part of Mr. Morris's collection, began to take out some stone spear-heads and inspect them.

" *Do* I? " asked Margery as she bit into one of the persimmons and offered the other to

Dick. " It seems hard to realize that it was only a little over a year ago that we took that walk, and I ate my first persimmon and fell into the creek. And to think that I didn't like you and Benjie then! Do possums really eat persimmons, Dick? Couldn't we have a possum hunt, sometime? "

" Yes," answered Dick to her questions. " Got a pencil and paper, Margie? "

"Coon he up a gum-tree
Possum in de holla,
Coon he roll himself in ha'ar,
Possum roll in talla,"

he hummed as he lifted out an Indian pipe.

There was a good deal of work in the cataloguing of the collection and Dick and Margery labored steadily for most of the afternoon. If Margery had been a person inclined to give up easily what she had once begun she would have been tempted to throw down her pen and declare she could write no more, for her fingers grew stiff and numb, and her back and shoulders ached from leaning over the desk. But the thought of the pleasure her grandfather would derive from the catalogue, as well as a feeling of pride against giving in before Dick, kept her at it.

Dick, turning from the glass case, noticed her air of fatigue. “ Here, Margery,” he commanded, “ you look tired. Get up and I’ll do the writing for a while. You just take the things out of the case and show them to me, then you can paste the numbers on while I write down what the object is.”

Gratefully, Margery resigned her place to Dick.

“ It’s still snowing—I’m afraid that nobody will get here,” sighed Margery, looking out of the window. “ I suppose I really ought to send for people, but Walter always has Sunday afternoon and evening off, and I don’t like to ask Papa to run the car, especially after he ran it all day yesterday. I suppose he would if I asked—but still, I don’t like to ask. Polly is coming out to supper, William or her father will bring her in their car, but I don’t see how the rest are to get here.”

“ I tell you,” suggested Dick. “ I have old Prince; he’s good and strong—one of the farm horses, you know. If your grandfather will let me have your box-sleigh I’ll drive around and get the people. The snow ought to be fine and deep by half-past seven."

"Oh, Dick! That's a perfect idea! I'll go and ask right away! Polly and I could go with you—what a lark."

Mr. Morris made no objection and Margery's father and mother thought the scheme a good one. Dick they knew to be a fine horseman and unusually trustworthy for his years.

At five Polly arrived, bringing in a breath of crisp, fresh air. "It's stopped snowing," she cried, "and it's going to be a wonderful evening!"

At Mrs. Morris's suggestion, it had been arranged early in the fall that the servants at the White House Farm should be given every Sunday afternoon and evening off, and that Margery should prepare and serve the Sunday evening supper. Margery was fond of cooking and of domestic things, and her mother was glad to see it and encouraged her in every way.

At a quarter past five Margery led Dick and Polly out to the big shining kitchen and presented them with aprons. Dick's apron refused to meet about his waist, and so it was hung from his neck. "The white badge of servitude," he dramatically pronounced it.

"What are you going to have?" asked Polly.

"Creamed oysters and chicken salad. I'm trusting there was enough chicken left over from last night," answered Margery, as she opened the refrigerator door. "Yes, there's plenty," and she brought out a big platter of cold chicken. "Here, Polly, you can cut this up, and this celery, while I set the table. And, Dick, I'll start you at making the salad dressing. I'll mix it and you can stir."

Polly obediently perched on a high stool in front of the porcelain-topped kitchen table and attacked the chicken-bones with a sharp little knife. Dick strolled about the kitchen, his hands in his pockets, inspecting the various highly colored calendars with which Kiley had decorated it.

"Come, Dick," remonstrated Margery, "remember that you are not a lily of the field—you'll have to work. See, I want you to stir this very slowly and carefully, adding a drop of oil about once in so often. Do you think that you can do that?"

" Yeth ma'am. But what will happen if I don't get the oil in at just the right 'once in so often'?"

" The mayonnaise will curdle."

" Gracious, Dick," laughed Polly, " this is a serious matter. Do be careful."

Dick cautiously lowered himself into a chair, and placed the bowl firmly between his knees.

" Where do you manage to have oysters all the time, Margie, when no one else in town can get them?" asked Polly as Margery, having set the table, got a big bowl of oysters out of the refrigerator.

" Oh, we corral them in the cellar where Kiley feeds them corn-meal and water to fatten them."

Polly laughed politely at what she thought was intended for a joke. " But really?" she questioned.

" Really we do. We buy them by the barrel and Kiley keeps them in the cellar."

" Yes, that's the way people do," put in Dick. " Remember your natural history. The oyster is an animal, and until he's actually pried out of his shell, he'll go on living if you give him plenty of water and feed him. He'll open his shell like a mouth, and then in you pop some corn-meal, and plenty of water, of course."

"And if he doesn't like anything you feed him, he just nicely covers it with beautiful shining stuff," remarked Margery, draining the water off the bowl of oysters, "and behold!—A pearl! I'd like to put something in an oyster, sometime, and see what would happen."

"I imagine you'd have a good long wait. Pearl making is a slow process."

"Wouldn't it be nice," Polly philosophized as she sliced energetically away at a stalk of celery, "if when disagreeable things came into our lives, like Teacher Sarah, for instance, we could just cover them with mother-of-pearl and turn them into something beautiful? Dick," leaning forward to look at the bowl on Dick's knees, "I'm sure that you are doing that too slowly, isn't he, Margery?"

"Yes, Dick, you ought to do it very rapidly and hard."

"But you said to do it gently and slow."

"Yes, but that was then, and this is now."

"A very lucid answer," murmured Dick, and beat away furiously. “ Give me camp cooking—salt horse and things like that.”

“ *Salt horse?* ” Margery was horrified, but Polly laughed.

“ He means salt-pork. Salt horse is just the camping-out name for it.”

As soon as supper was over, Dick hurried out to the stable to hitch up the sleigh and the girls hastily cleared the table. As she knew they were anxious to be through, Mrs. Morris came out into the pantry to assist with the dish-washing.

It was very snug and warm tucked away in the straw that filled the bottom of the box-sleigh, with plenty of heavy robes over them. The girls sat close together, arm in arm, and did not say much. It had stopped snowing and the moon pushed its way through the clouds, and rode high overhead. It shone down dazzlingly on the white roadway and the snowy fields, and touched with silver the snow-wreathed alders and cedars in the angles of the fences. Beyond the fields the woods rose dark and shadowy. Faintly from the town came the sound of a church bell, half lost in the tinkling of the sleigh-bells and the crisp creaking of the snow as the runners of the sleigh cut through it. Here and there they passed some cosy little home where the lamplight shone from the windows across the snow.

"I read the other day," remarked Polly, drawing the robe over her knees closer about her, "that Sidney Smith said that he would just as soon sit in a strong draught, put his feet in a bucket of ice-water and ring a dinner-bell as to go sleighing. I'm sure he would have changed his mind if he had been with us to-night."

"I'm sure he would," agreed Margery with conviction.

They reached the town, and jingled through sleepy old streets where the moon shone down sedately on steep roofs. Before an old-fashioned house they stopped and Dick whistled loudly. The door opened and pretty Sally Watson and her brother came out and climbed into the sleigh beside Polly and Margery. They stopped before other old-fashioned doorways and other young people came trooping out to take their places in the sleigh. Then they crossed the old covered bridge to the open country, and on out to the Crowell farm to get Esther.

By the time they reached the White House Farm and had been warmed before the wood-fires in hall and library, and had drunk the hot cocoa Mrs. Morris had waiting for them, they were too hilarious to do any serious work at carol-singing.

" Still we have made a beginning and we can get down to real work next time," Mrs. Morris said as she rose from the piano at the end of the evening.

She crossed the room to her husband, who was standing before the fire. " If youth, good spirits, and enthusiasm can make voices sweet," she said softly, " the singing about the Tree of Light on Christmas ought to make the angels envious."

CHAPTER IV

CHRISTMAS EVE

It was the day before Christmas and the old streets of Renwyck's Town were gay. Every shop window was decorated and even the undertaker's establishment had a great scarlet wreath of immortelles in its glass door to give it an air of festivity. The show-windows of the toy-shop and of Mrs. Stacey's Needlework Emporium were declared by many to be equal to any holiday display in Philadelphia, Renwyck's Town's nearest city. It was also reported that as many as ten people and a dog had been seen gazing at one time into the window of Mr. Finklestein, the butcher, where a small stuffed pig attired in a sort of harness of pink and white pop-corn was the center of an original and artistic scheme of decoration. Behind the pig Mr. Finklestein had placed a large pan of scrapple, tilted to show the motto it bore spelled out in cranberries, "Mery Christmas," the "mery" all the more cordial for its one r. On either side of the scrapple was a small statue of Santa Claus modelled out of the best brand of pure white lard; artistic endeavors for which Mr. Finklestein justly took credit.

The shops were crowded with desperate last-minute shoppers who were frantically buying a bit of ribbon to finish the pincushion for Cousin Mary, or an extra quarter of a yard to complete the new dress for little Jane's doll. Busy housewives were ordering from flurried clerks the final details for to-morrow's dinner. The turkey, all important, had in most cases been selected several days before.

Margery had a busy day before her, but everywhere along the pavement were friends and acquaintances to whom she must wish the merriest of Christmases. Then she must waylay Mr. Jameson, Polly's stout and indulgent father, and hear from him, in the strictest confidence, just what Polly was to find in her stocking the next morning; she had to stop Dr. Huston driving past in his old buggy to tell him all about the party for mill-workers' children that afternoon; and she had to run across the street to chat with young Mrs. Clark about her wonderful baby and with old Mr. Sims about his rheumatism, and to agree with one on child-training and with the other on drugs and doctors and the evils of an east wind.

" Margery, dear," remonstrated her mother, coming out of the baker-shop, " haven't you gone out to the Morris Farm yet? Walter has been waiting in front of the Smiths' with the car for you all this time. Hurry, dear, I want you to get out there and back before I am through here. I have to go down to the Martins' yet, and then I have to go out to old Mrs. Smedley's and leave her the little check Grandpapa is anxious for her to have. I shan't want to wait for you. I still have so much to do at home! "

Repentant, Margery hurried across the street to the waiting car and climbed in.

" The Morris Farm, Walter," she said, drawing the robe tight around her, and snuggling down close to the big mastiff sitting on the back seat.

The road to the Morris Farm was minutely familiar, but to-day Margery especially enjoyed the swift ride through the strip of wintry woods, and between the fields still covered with snow, to the big, old-fashioned red-brick mansion that stood far back from the road at the end of a long avenue of pine-trees.

The front door of the house was hospitably unlatched, as was the custom at the farm, and Margery hurried through the hall and sitting-room to the kitchen beyond, where she knew she was likely to find Deborah Davis, the housekeeper, who made the farm a homelike, livable place for Mr. Morris and his orphan grandsons, Dick Ball and little Benjamin.

She found Deborah standing before a table on which was spread a row of mince pies. Beside her perched Benjamin, his curly head bent over a pile of black walnuts that he was picking from their shells.

"Oh, Margie," he cried, delighted, as he looked up and saw her standing in the doorway, "I'm so glad you've come." He threw both arms about her waist.

Margery bent over him. The little chap held an especial place in her heart.

"I left a package in the hall," she motioned with her lips to Deborah over Benjamin's head.

Deborah smiled. "I'll attend to it," she said. “Sit down, child. Benjie is picking out some walnuts for me, and I am going to make some candy. Don’t my pies look nice? How are you all at home?”

“I can’t stay long,” Margery murmured; “I just came for the toys for the party this afternoon, and to bring the packages.”

Nevertheless, she sat down in a rocking-chair by the sunny geranium-filled window, and loosened her coat at the throat. The big old-fashioned kitchen at the farm was a cheerful place with its many-paned windows filled with plants, its gay rag-carpet and yellow painted walls and above all its air of spotless cleanliness. Some of Margery’s happiest hours had been spent there with Deborah. The tender youthful heart of the little housekeeper made her the beloved friend of half the young people in Renwyck’s Town. Margery was an especial favorite of Deborah’s who thoroughly understood her nature with its pride and impetuosity and at times petulance, and yet deep loyalty and splendid truth and frankness. “Margery will make many mistakes in her life,” she was fond of saying, “but she will never do a small, or mean or underhand thing.”

And Margery in turn loved her little friend and brought to her an affection and dependence that was a happiness to the childless, loving heart.

As Margery sat in the rocking-chair and teased Benjamin by deftly filching the nuts from him, she thought how pretty Deborah looked to-day with her cheeks flushed with the heat of the stove, and her silvery hair, usually drawn down over her ears in tight bands, disarranged so that soft little tendrils curled about her forehead. Her little gray gown and white apron and Quaker-like surplice were, as always, spotlessly neat.

" Deborah is pretty," Margery thought to herself as her tongue chattered on about the plans for the Christmas party. "And you'll be sure to come early and help—remember, you promised," she said. " There, Benjie—there are your nuts. Look at all that I've caught from you! Christmas is nice, isn't it? " she finished with a laugh as she stood up to go.

Deborah tucked back a soft little gray curl. " Yes," she said, " it is. And the older you get the nicer it seems. There is a time when people have outgrown childhood when they don't seem to get much out of Christmas. They lose sight of what Christmas means and they just take it as something to work hard over. It reminds me of people that are so busy cleaning up the house and making extra preparations for the minister's visit that by the time he gets there they are too tired to enjoy it—or even to be half-way polite to the poor man.

" But when you get to be my age you don't expect so much from Christmas. You're just glad to do as the hymn says and ' rest beside the weary road to hear the angels sing.' And somehow, no matter how deaf you are, you just can't help hearing some of the singing. It may be just a snatch but you do hear some. But perhaps the thing that I like best about Christmas as I get older is that I have come to see what a wonderful time it is for people to get back into their friendships. Bessie Brown and Sallie Robins have been sending each other pincushions and tidies for years and have come to consider it an awful nuisance. But some day some little disagreement or coolness comes up between them. And after a while they get over it and would like to make up but they don't know how to go about it. Then at Christmas time they just send an extra friendly note with the pincushion and the tidy, and the first thing you know the whole fuss is made up without any trouble or explanations at all. What shall I wear to your party to-morrow night—my gray dress or my best black India silk?" she finished unexpectedly.

"The gray," answered Margery, "and be sure to come early. You promised you would, you know. And now I must fly! Mother mustn't be kept waiting. She has such a lot to do to-day."

After luncheon the car was filled with toys and packages of warm clothing and she started out again for the town. There she found Polly and the other girls waiting in the assembly room of the Woman's Club, where it had been arranged that the party for the children of the mill-workers should be held.

The tree was already half trimmed and the busy young workers were scurrying about.

"A tree-hook, a tree-hook," chanted Sally Watson, as Margery appeared in the doorway, "my kingdom for a tree-hook! Margery, give me some tree-hooks! There's that beloved tree

THE EAGER CHILDREN BEGAN TO ARRIVE.

half trimmed and somebody's lost the tree-hooks."

"I haven't any," cried Margery. "Take hair-pins. It wouldn't seem like Christmas if there were enough tree-hooks. Nobody ever does have enough."

"Contribute the hair-pins then," ordered Polly. "And climb up there and finish trimming that tree."

Obediently, Margery climbed up the step-ladder and proceeded to hang up a fat wax cupid and a glass strawberry side by side.

Scarcely had the last doll been placed in position and the last cornucopia been hung up, and the missing tree-hooks discovered on top of the cake, when the eager children began to arrive and their young hostesses' work commenced in earnest. "Aren't they adorable?" whispered Polly to Margery as a group of the little guests clustered in front of the tree, and with soft dark Italian eyes glowing and humorous Irish mouths smiling, gazed at it in silent awe.

"But they are so shy and quiet," complained Sally. "Come on, let's play 'I sent a letter to my love' and stir them up!"

By moral suasion and physical force the children were placed in a circle, and Sally danced about the room back of them, singing with all the vivacity she could muster—and Sally was an unusually vivacious young person—

" 'I sent a letter to my love,
I carried water in my glove,
I dropped it, I dropped it, I dropped it, I dropped it.'

For goodness' sake, Margery, make him pick it up and run after me!"

But Isadore Abraham refused to pick anything up, or to run after anyone, much less a despised girl, and it ended in Margery's doing it for him.

Thinking that Sally had made a mistake in selecting a boy, and that a girl would be more amenable to social conventions, Margery dropped the handkerchief in her turn behind Ada Bolari, at the same time taking the precaution to explain in a whisper that Ada must pick it up and run after her, Margery, so that she in her turn could have the privilege of dropping it behind somebody else.

But Ada was plainly not interested. She

smiled a polite acceptance of the information, and continued to stare wistfully into space, her fat little hands folded on her stomach.

"Did you ever see such a collection of little graven images?" whispered Polly in despair. "And goodness, Margery, what is that child going home now for?"

Through the window they could see a fat blond little girl running down the street.

"It's Fanny Brown," exclaimed Sally. "She lives in that little house around the corner—her mother works at the factory. Somebody will have to catch her."

"Come on, Polly," cried Margery, and laughing the two girls ran out of the door and down the street after the fat little legs that seemed to fairly fly over the pavement.

"Gracious," panted Margery, as they finally caught up with Fanny at her own front gate, "to think that fat little butter-ball could run so fast!"

"I've had enough party!" shrieked Fanny, realizing that she was fairly cornered at last. "I've had enough party!"

Polly and Margery looked at each other. "And the party has only just begun," groaned

Polly. "Do you suppose they all want to go home?" Margery asked with a sigh. They turned to Fanny. "But it's going to be such a nice party," they cried in unison.

"Had enough party."

"Yes, but it's going to be the most beautiful party! Come back with us, Fanny, like a good little girl!"

Fanny began to prance. "Had enough party! Had enough party!" she protested loudly.

"But, Fanny, you must be a good little girl!"

The fat little legs pranced up and down faster than ever. "Had enough party," their owner insisted. "Don't want any more party!"

Despairingly, Polly tried again. "But, Fanny ——"

"Don't want any more party!"

Margery tried a new tack. "Santa Claus is going to be very much disappointed if Fanny isn't there," she remarked in a loud voice to Polly.

"Had enough party." But the tone was wavering.

"Poor Santa Claus! And he had such a nice doll for Fanny."

"What kind of a doll?" Fanny plainly showed interest.

"Oh, a lovely doll with curly hair. Polly, I'm almost frozen. We'll be sick if we stand here. Come, Fanny, we'll have to run to get back before Santa Claus comes. You wouldn't hurt poor Santa's feelings!"

"Thank goodness, she has some consideration for Santa Claus's feelings if she hasn't for ours," whispered Polly, as Fanny slipped her hand into hers and they all ran back to the club-house.

"Where have you been?" cried Esther, coming to the door. "You look half frozen! What shall we do with these children? We've played London Bridge, and Going to Jerusalem, and Ring-around-a-rosy, and they just stand still looking bored to death! We girls have had to do all the playing, and let them watch us. Do suggest something to get things started."

"Have the ice-cream now," suggested the practical Margery. "When I was little a party meant ice-cream to me, and I never felt happy or contented until I had had my ice-cream, and could give a free mind to playing games."

"That's a good idea," agreed Sally.

But the rest of the young hostesses did not comply so easily. A party was almost as solemn a function to them as to the children. They had painstakingly mapped out this one on definite lines: the children were to enter wildly exhilarated over being invited to a party at all; there were to be exciting games in which everyone was to be very much at home; then Santa Claus was to appear and the presents were to be distributed, and finally as the crowning touch, the ice-cream was to be served.

"No, no," Esther declared louder than she realized. "It never would do to have the ice-cream first!"

But at the mention of ice-cream there was such an obvious lessening of embarrassment, such a visible brightening of small faces, that the girls looked at one another. "The ayes have it," said Sally; "the motion is seconded and carried that the ice-cream be served at once, right away, *tout de suite.*"

" Stick them in a circle on the floor," ordered Polly, " while we fly to serve them, and lift the pall that is hanging over this festive occasion."

" To think that such cold chilly stuff should have such an exhilarating effect—and such a loosening effect on tongues," whispered Margery to Polly, as each child was finally given a large plate of ice-cream and a delectable sticky cake.

" Too loosening an effect," laughed Polly as small Rosa Donini burst into roars of stormy grief because Charlie Fitzgerald had taken half of her cake.

The girls hastened to give Rosa another cake in the place of the purloined one, and to remove the young Irishman to a secluded corner where he could not poke, strike, slap, or grab from any other child.

Margery devoted herself to a round, black-eyed Polish baby of three who was eating her ice-cream with the eagerness of a baby robin swallowing an insect. " Baby dear," she cried, kneeling down beside her, " you mustn't eat it so fast—it will make your poor little head ache."

But the baby had already dropped her spoon and was clutching her forehead with screams of indignation.

" Do you suppose that they can possibly eat any more? " asked Sally, coming up to Margery and Polly, " because if they can't we might as well let Santa Claus appear on the scene now."

" It's a good thing that Fanny condescended to come back out of consideration of Santa Claus's feelings," laughed Margery a few minutes later, " for he looks, poor thing, as though he needed all the kindness he can get," and she nodded toward the figure with a pack on its back that was painfully squeezing through an improvised fireplace built of three chairs and a screen.

" It's funny," giggled Sally, " but there is something about that suit of his that suggests that it might have begun life as a pair of red gymnasium bloomers and a sweater, and that as he has borrowed them they are rather too tight. Quite uncomfortable in fact."

"And do you know," returned Margery, " that if I didn't know positively that it was Santa Claus speaking, I should suspect that might be Polly with a thimble in her mouth, to disguise her speech."

"I hope she won't swallow it," murmured Esther anxiously.

At last laden with gifts and wreathed in smiles, the happy children were gone, and there was no one left save a tiny Italian girl of about six, who sat in a little chair by the door with her heavy baby brother in her lap.

"I wonder why they don't go home," said Margery. "It's half-past four now, and I have to be at the station to meet the Watkins at five."

"I'll go and see," volunteered Sally. "She says they are waiting for some of us to take them home," she reported, coming back.

"Where do they live?"

"Down on Collins Street."

"Well, I can't possibly take them there—I have to fly now."

"And I."

"And I."

"Well," said Margery, "that's down by the station. Polly, you and I could take them. And then go back to the station. Come on."

The baby was brown and dimpled, and Margery, as she held out her hand to him, decided that he was adorable. But by the time they had gone a square she had completely changed her mind. The baby refused to hold anyone's hand, refused to walk, and plumping down on the sidewalk, refused to budge.

"What shall we do with him?" gasped Polly after she had vainly tugged him to his feet for the third time, only to have him collapse again like a sack of meal.

"Can't you make him behave himself properly?" she questioned his sister.

The little girl smiled, a radiant smile, and shook her head.

"Well, something has to be done," Margery sighed. "That train will be here before we know it. We might carry him—but he's so awfully heavy. I have an idea! We're near the O'Neils. I'll run in and see if I can borrow Jennie O'Neil's sled."

"Now then, young man," Polly said firmly, as Margery appeared from the O'Neils' yard dragging a small sled, "you are going to ride on this and behave like a properly brought up baby!"

But the baby had no intentions of behaving like a properly brought up anything. Howling and kicking his heels against the sled, he promptly rolled off into the snow.

"You'll have to sit on the sled and hold him on," declared Margery to the little sister. "We'll pull you both. Come on, Polly. Gee up, horsey."

The horses cavorted and ran and cried, "Gee up, horsey," in the most natural and horse-like manner, but still the baby howled and beat his heels against the sled in a fine frenzy of Latin temperament.

The pavements were rough and slippery, and the double load on the sled grew increasingly hard to pull.

"I declare," panted Margery, at length, stopping to rest, "I believe that it would be just as easy to carry him for a while. I'm going to try it anyway."

In Margery's arms the baby grew rather more reposeful; although he casually kicked her in the side, and wept great salt tears down the back of her neck.

"Really, Polly," she gasped after she had staggered with him for half a block, "a baby can be as cruel as Nero, or any of those old tyrants."

"Let me carry him for a while."

"I tell you what we'll do. I'll take his feet and you can take his head and shoulders and we'll cart him along that way. And he can yell his head off if he wants to," she finished elegantly.

The baby, however, accepted this new mode of transportation with astonishing composure.

"Perhaps he's used to being carried this way," suggested Polly after they had gone a full block in peaceful quiet. "I declare!—*he's asleep!*"

Margery, glancing over her shoulder, laughed as she saw the baby, the picture of innocence, long lashes resting on his plump cheeks, and his dewy, rosy lips parted in gentle slumber.

The silent little sister tugged at Polly's sleeve, and smiling her shy and radiant smile, pointed to a house a few steps beyond.

"Da housa," she murmured.

"At last!" breathed Polly and Margery, as they handed the baby in at the door to a buxom young woman and thankfully fled to the station.

They were both weary after their efforts at baby-training, and they were glad to rest in the dingy little waiting-room. "I never see this station," said Margery, settling back in her place with a long sigh, "without thinking of that first day I came to Renwyck's Town, and how mad I was, and how Dick met me."

"What a lot has happened since then," said Polly thoughtfully. "I wonder what is going to happen next."

They were silent for a few minutes, feeling slightly depressed, they scarcely knew why.

"I suppose we're tired," remarked Margery after a while.

"I suppose so."

The station clock ticked and there was no other sound beyond the snapping of the coal in the sheet-iron stove.

The door opened and Dick and Sam came in. "We thought we'd find you here," Dick explained. "We want to be on hand, too, to welcome our young friends, so forth, and so on. Oh, I say, there comes the train now. We were just in time!"

They hurried out to the platform just as the train came to a standstill.

“There they are,” cried Margery, waving frantically to a tall, slender, red-haired boy standing on the train steps. “There's Jack! And, oh, there's Jane! Jane! Jane!”

She ran forward to throw her arms round a slight, dark-haired girl whose shy, wistful face was beaming with affection and delight. “Oh, Janey, you duck, it's so wonderful to see you.”

More sedately she shook hands with Perry Watkins, a big boy whose handsome countenance showed both force and intelligence, and with Marion, Jane's elder sister. Then as Mr. and Mrs. Watkins stepped down from the train, she hurried forward to speak to them.

Laughing, talking, exclaiming, tripping over the umbrella that Jack in his excitement managed at various intervals to poke between the feet of almost everyone in the party, they all surged down the platform to the front of the station where Walter waited with the car.

As they were the thinnest members of the group, Margery and Jane crowded into the front seat with Walter, where they sat rapturously holding hands and exchanging whispered confidences. The winter evening had settled down and the stars were shining, while in the old houses the lights had been lit, and shone out across the snow through holly-trimmed windows. Here and there someone had placed a tall candle in the window to mark Christmas Eve.

All her life, Margery was to remember her glow of happiness, the feeling of home-coming and Christmas joy, as she led her friends into the big, holly-decked hall at the White House Farm where there was candle-light and a blazing wood-fire, and her father and mother waiting with welcome on their lips and in their hearts.

"Oh, Janey," she cried a dozen times, as after dinner she and Jane wrapped up in heavy sweaters and coats in preparation for the evening in the village square by the Tree of Light, "it *is* so wonderful to have you here!"

"It's wonderful for us to be here," remarked Perry Watkins, coming to the back of the hall. "We never thought last summer that we should all be here so happily together."

He and Margery looked at each other in thoughtful silence. They could not speak of those awful hours the summer before when battling in a stormy sea it had seemed impossible that they should ever see another Christmas, but neither of them could ever forget.

"Margery dear," called Mrs. Morris, "we must hurry. Come, boys and girls, come, everybody!"

The crowd had already begun to gather as the party from the White House Farm reached the moonlit village square where the Tree of Light, tall and straight, stood draped with garlands of electric lights. Automobiles were parked in all the side streets and in the shed of the neighboring church were tied a row of carriages and sleighs.

"Oh, Margie," cried Polly, as Margery stepped out of the car. "I thought you would never get here. Everyone is here, Dick, and Sam, and Sally and Esther, and all the rest of the class at school. There they are close to the tree."

Perry moved closer to her. "I say, Margery," he said, "I'm glad we came. I didn't think much of the idea of this Tree of Light, at first. But it is interesting. Look at all those people around the tree—look at the different types of faces."

Margery turned to look at the faces near her. Excited as she was she noted the differences between them; here the kindly, half-humorous countenance of some farmer, the descendant of some long-ago pioneer; there the vivid, swarthy face of Italy; beyond, the bitter visage of some Jew from Russia. "To think," she whispered to her mother, who, tuning fork in hand, had come up to her, "that we should all be here together to-night—Jew, and Gentile, and every nationality."

Her mother smiled and pressed her arm. "And all good Americans," she said. "Is the choir all ready? Everybody here? We might as well begin, then. Papa will press the button to turn on the lights on the tree just as soon as the first carol has been sung."

"Come on, now," whispered Jack. "Don't quaver whatever we do. People will think we are ashamed of ourselves—come on, loud and clear!"

In spite of his warning, the choir began rather quaveringly. It had suddenly felt itself very youthful and inexperienced, and also a little awed by the solemn hush of the crowd gathered close about it. But if it was young and frightened, it also was brave, and led by Perry's fine voice and Margery's clear pipe it kept courageously on until the last verse of the old carol, when just as the lights were flashed on that turned the tall dark spruce into a vivid glowing symbol of Christmas joy, a rich true voice from someone in the crowd took up the words again. Others about the tree joined in, and once more they sang the beautiful old song:

"The first Nowell the Angel did say,
Was to three poor shepherds in fields as they lay;
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep
In a cold winter's night that was so deep;
Nowell, Nowell, Nowell, Nowell,
Born is the King of Israel."

"It's almost twelve o'clock," said Mrs. Morris, trying to herd her party together. "We really must go home. Come, Margery. Come, Jane. Jack, you rascal, stop talking to Sally, and come! See, the lights will be out in a few minutes."

Margery turned to Dick. She wanted to say something, to express in some way what she had felt as she had stood there singing while the lights had flashed on in the great tree.

Dick understood. "It wasn't so bad," he said in his taciturn way, "was it now? Made you feel pretty 'Christmassy'—and, well, like a pretty good American, too?"

"Oh, Dick, didn't it, though?"

"Margery. Come, dear."

"Yes, Mother—I'm coming." She climbed into the car, and sank down on the front seat, between Jane and her father. The moon shone down on the old houses clustered about the square, silvering the roofs and quaint tall chimneys, and lighted the crowd that still lingered about the tree.

"Look, Jane, look back." As the girls gazed the lights on the tree went out, leaving only the star blazing at the top, symbol of hope in an unhappy, war-torn world.

"They looked up and saw a star!" sang Margery softly, slipping her hand into Jane's.

"Shining in the East beyond them far,
And to the Earth it gave great light,
And so it continued both day and night,
Nowell, Nowell—"

CHAPTER V

THE ICE STORM

The winter sleet was falling steadily, heavily, as though it were lead instead of ice. The sky was leaden, too. The meadows and the town beyond were shut out from view; even the tall box-borders of the garden and the tree by the gate had disappeared behind the heavy curtain of sleet.

The bushes by the drawing-room window kept up a steady rattle against the glass, and Margery practising a page of monotonous exercises felt no less dreary than the gray gloom outside.

"*One,* and *two,* and *three,* and *four,* and," she counted listlessly to the metronome. "Oh, how I hate these old exercises. One, *two,* three, *four.* Oh, dear, I wish it would clear up!"

She left the piano and strolled to the window. In the bushes outside hung an empty robins' nest, a ruin, its tiny thatch hanging loose in the wind. Dick had once told her of finding a mouse that had occupied a cast-off birds' nest, lined it with downy fur and made a comfortable winter home out of it. There, snug and warm, it had swung in the winter gales while the snow swirled about it. The only drawback being that the stairway to its home, the slanting branch of the bush in which the nest was hung, was often so covered with ice that it was impossible for the mouse to get down, and if down to slide up. Margery, eager to see if this nest were inhabited, leaned forward, pressing her face against the cold window-pane.

Her head ached feverishly and a knife seemed to be sticking into her chest. The coolness of the glass was soothing to her flushed forehead and she remained pressed against the window, half idly expecting to see the pointed ears and sharp black eyes of the little deer mouse, or " white foot," sticking out of the nest, half idly watching to see if some of the winter birds, the juncos or chickadees, king-sparrows or downy-woodpeckers, might have been driven in close to the house by the storm.

"What does become of them?" she thought, closing her eyes. "I wonder if they don't get cold in the storms. If I feel so badly in a nice warm house, how must they feel out in the snow and sleet? I'm glad that Dick and I spread food for them anyway."

With Dick's assistance on Christmas morning, Margery had made a feeding station for the birds in one of the blue-spruces near the house. They had tied suet on the branches for the chickadees and blue jays, put crumbs and seeds in feeding cups for the juncos and sparrows and cracked nuts for the nuthatches.

"There were a lot of birds here this morning," she thought, rubbing her hand over her aching forehead. "I wish that Jane and the others had been here to see them. Oh, I miss Jane and the boys so! It was such fun over Christmas! I wish that it had never had to stop. I never can have such a wonderful time again!"

The Christmas house-party had been almost too great a success. Life had seemed stale and unprofitable to all the young people after it was over and the routine of ordinary life resumed. Margery, who had exerted herself beyond her strength and who had caught a heavy cold beside, felt the reaction keenly.

" The only comfort I have," she had declared to Dick several days after her guests had left, " is to look at the snap-shots we took, and to live over again the fun we had."

Dick had held out his hand for the photographs with a laugh. " Cheer up, Margie," he urged. " You're usually such a level-headed young person! I suppose what is hitting you hardest is that everything went so well—the right people and the right time and everything."

" That's what Jane was always saying about the house-party," she answered.

" It's only once in a lifetime," Jane had declared on Christmas night as she and Margery were dressing for the party, " that everything comes just right—that you get the place and the people and the time together. Think of being here, in this perfect old house, with everything so beautiful, the snowy fields and the woods and the quaint little old town," and Jane, who was an art-student, went to the window to gaze once more on the stretch of snowy, moonlit meadows and the distant lights of the town. "And think of us all being here together. For you to have your mother and me to have mine, after we both had been separated from them last summer. And for me to have Marion, and to see her so well and strong, and so happy at college."

"And to have the boys, too," suggested Margery, with a teasing smile. "Don't forget Perry and Jack and little Andrew."

Jane had not always been good friends with her stepbrothers, and Margery had done her share in bringing about a better feeling.

Jane had gathered her silken kimono closer about her, and going to the fire had held out her hand to the blaze. "Yes," she said shyly, bending down and looking into the glowing coals, "it is nice to have them here, and to be on such good terms with them. They are so nice, and so thoughtful, and kind. They are like real sons to Mother, and I'm sure real brothers couldn't be nicer to Marion and me."

Recalling their conversation and the fun that they had had dressing together in her big comfortable room for the Christmas party, Margery leaned back on the window-seat, and putting a fat sofa cushion behind her head, settled herself to live again in memory the delights of the happy, care-free holidays.

Best of all she had enjoyed the party of Christmas night.

She had been allowed to invite whomever she wanted and the list included not only most of the young people of Renwyck's Town but Deborah Davis and old Dr. Huston, Mr. and Mrs. Jameson and all the Crowells, big and little. "I suppose that there will have to be cards and conversation for the older people," she had said to her mother, "and Deborah has promised to look after Benjie and little Andy Watkins, and all the little Crowells, and anybody else too young to dance."

"But all we in-betweeners will want to dance," Polly, who was helping Margery and Mrs. Morris to make plans, had cried. "There is so little opportunity to dance here in Renwyck's Town, and it will be perfect here on these wonderful hardwood floors!"

In the close community life of the place the foibles and fads of everyone were known. Margery, Polly and Esther had worked for several days before Christmas to devise little gifts to hang on the tree, gifts that, while touching each one's idiosyncrasy with wit and appropriateness, should at the same time be kind. Mrs. Morris had been very insistent upon that last clause.

Just before it was time for the merrymakers to gather in a large circle around the tree, Margery had confided to Mr. Jameson, Polly Jameson's stout and amiable father, her regret that she had not thought in time of having a Santa Claus to distribute the jokes and gifts.

" It seems as though something always gets left out," she had lamented. " No matter how carefully one plans."

" Easy enough to fix this something," Mr. Jameson had answered, and there had followed a great sh-sh of whispering from the corner where he and Margery were sitting.

Everybody had been too busy dancing to pay any attention to them or notice when Mr. Jameson, followed by Margery, had slipped up the stairs with remarkable agility considering his two hundred and fifty pounds.

Katie, the rosy-cheeked waitress, had collapsed into helpless giggles as she was sent scurrying hither and thither obeying orders. Margery's scarlet evening cloak must be brought and draped over Mr. Jameson's shoulders. Mr. Morris's sealskin sleighing cap had been discovered and perched on the summit of Mr. Jameson's bald head, and, most delightful moment to Katie of all, Polly's white fox muff, her father's Christmas gift to her, had been extracted from the pile of wraps on the guest-room bed, and tied, as Santa Claus' beard, under her fond parent's chin.

"Oh, you look splendid," Margery had exulted, giving the beard a final critical pat. "If only we had something for Santa's high boots! Wait a minute until I see what I can find! Here's something," coming back from her room with two big sheets of dark green blotting paper. "We can wrap these around your ankles for boots!"

"Napoleon never had any that looked more military," Mr. Jameson had declared as Margery and Katie went down on their knees and tied the blotters on. "They are very stagey and romantic! Now for my pack."

The laundry bag had supplied that, and the now hysterical Katie had escorted Santa Claus down the back stairs, while Margery had hurried down the front way to assemble her guests around the tree. Just as with many witticisms among the boys and much admiring laughter among the girls, they had been finally settled in a circle, there was a tremendous banging and stamping and jingling of bells outside the door at the back of the hall, and Santa Claus, his pack on his back, had entered.

Margery, thinking of all the happiness of the Christmas time and contrasting it with the loneliness and dreariness of the sleet-storm, and oppressed by the pain in her head and chest, leaned back and lost herself in the joys of living it all over again. Outside the storm grew worse, the ice-coated bushes clashed against the windows with every gust of wind, the trees rattled with a glassy sound. Inside the room grew cooler as the fire on the hearth died down, but Margery had drifted off to sleep.

When she woke she was stiff and chilled. It was cold by the window; one of the sashes had been left slightly open and a current of air came in.

"Oh, dear!" Margery sighed, rubbing her

heavy eyes. "How dreadful I feel. I wish Papa and Mamma were home!"

Her father and mother had gone to the city for the day and would not be home until the late evening train.

She dragged herself off the window-seat and up the stairs to her own room. From her window she tried to gaze out across the gray lawn and garden.

"The poor birds," she thought wearily. "I can't see one. What becomes of them in a storm?"

"Grandpapa," she asked as she sat down to a lonely dinner with her grandfather, "what becomes of the birds in weather like this?"

Her grandfather looked at her keenly. "You don't look well, Margery," he asked. "What's the matter? The birds?" he went on as Margery protested that she was "perfectly well." "Oh, I suppose they have rather a hard time. The wild ducks, when the tides in the Delaware are very high or the waters are very rough, usually come up into the quieter waters of the creek. So I suppose that they learn to take care of themselves.

“ The crows have a worse time. In the pine-barrens, I have seen them in a pitiful state after a storm. They tuck their heads beneath their wing coverts, protecting the whole body except one side of their heads which the feathers of the wings cannot shelter. This leaves an eye exposed which freezes in very severe weather, causing a slow, painful death.”

“ Ugh,” shivered Margery.

After dinner she went at once to bed. Her chest hurt her so that she had trouble in getting to sleep but at last she slipped into troubled dreams.

The fate of the birds seemed to be mixed with the pain in her chest and head. At one time she felt herself to be a crow hiding in a tall pine-tree in the barrens, and the icy winter wind freezing her to death. Again she thought that she was a meadow-lark crouched in the snow in some hidden corner of a field. The snow turned to fire and seemed to be burning her up. She cried out with the pain and opened her eyes.

“ Yes, darling, yes,” someone murmured, and Margery grew conscious that her mother was bending anxiously over her. Her gaze fastened on the golden birds embroidered on her mother's kimono, and she cried again, half in panic that they too would be frozen, half in pain.

Again she drifted off into unconsciousness, and then again she roused; she realized vaguely, as though across eons of space, that the doctor was bending over her, and that behind him, white-faced and frightened, her father and mother were standing.

Out of a dim mist a voice said something about pneumonia.

"Yes," said Margery, her voice sounding very queer and far-away to her own ears as though someone else were using it for her, "that's the trouble—the meadow-larks and the crows have pneumonia. The mouse is all right—he has the robin's nest to live in."

Her eyes closed and she relapsed again into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER VI

THE SPRING THAW

Before Margery was strong enough to be propped up in the big chair by the window of her mother's room, February had come. It was a gray February with the snow melted and the rain beating down every day. Here and there muskrats had eaten through the banks that confined the swollen creek and the waters had poured over the meadows and farm lands, leaving them flattened and mud-stained.

From her window Margery could look down over the garden to the dreary meadows beyond. The sight depressed her and she asked to have her chair moved away from the window to the side of the chimney-place where a bright little fire was kept burning.

Her illness had been acute. The delicacy, which in spite of an outward appearance of health, had lingered on since she had been nearly drowned the summer before, and the fact that she was growing fast, had made her less able to resist the ravages of pneumonia. It had been a time of terrible anxiety for the household at the White House Farm, but Margery had been too ill to realize much that was happening, and she never remembered very distinctly those weeks of pain and delirium.

Even now that she was able to sit up for several hours each day, the doctor thought her too weak for visits from her young friends. Only Deborah Davis had been allowed to see her.

Deborah came every afternoon and her quaint little ways, and the cheerfulness that was never forced but which came from some deep inner serenity wrought by trials and sorrows lived bravely through, was very helpful to Margery, and her quiet voice setting forth bits of philosophy or telling droll little stories of the people she had known, was a factor in the convalescence.

"I remember," Deborah began one afternoon, taking her knitting out of the bag, "what a time we had one year when I was a girl, with our chickens and ducks. We had one old rooster that was very unpopular with all the other chickens. They would peck at him continually, so he went and lived with the ducks, and became a sort of king over them. I can see him now, leading the ducks down to the pond, all of them waddling after him single file. Well, finally, we sold off all the ducks but one, and that left it and the rooster in solitary grandeur. Evidently they didn't like that, for the rooster went back to the society of the chickens, taking the duck with him. One night we heard a tremendous commotion in the hen-house. My sister came to me all excited. 'Debby,' she said, 'there's a weasel in that hen-house as sure as fate. We'll have to take the boys' gun and go and shoot it.' The boys were out, so we took their gun, and inwardly very scared but outwardly the bravest of the brave, we went out to the hen-house. We were terribly afraid to fire that gun, so we peeped in at the little window in the door first, and what do you suppose we saw? Why, the duck was trying to act like a chicken and perch on the roost the way the others did. Of course its old web toes wouldn't help it, and every time it climbed up it fell off again, and then the chickens would squawk. But still it ——"

"Deborah," interrupted Margery, "do you

know I don't understand Polly at all. Everybody else writes to me, but I don't hear a word from Polly."

Mrs. Morris glanced up anxiously from the letter she was writing.

Deborah took off her spectacles and wiped them.

"I think that it's awfully queer that Polly doesn't write or 'phone or do anything. Everybody else has. Why, Dick and Sam and Sally remember me all the time. Just look at all these funny drawings from Dick," and she held up some cartoons Dick had sent that morning. "I've thought surely every day that I'd hear from Polly."

"Yes, dear, I know," her mother murmured, going to the window and looking out.

"Don't you think it's queer, Deborah?" Margery went on. "You don't suppose I said anything to hurt Polly's feelings before I was sick, do you? I felt so queer and ill that I might have said anything."

Deborah cast off five stitches. "One, two, three, four, five," she counted aloud. "No, dear," she said gently, "it isn't anything that you have done. Sorrow has come to Polly. That's the reason of her silence."

"Sorrow?"

"Yes, sorrow, dear."

"Polly isn't sick—or dead, or anything?" asked Margery, looking at her mother piteously.

"No, dear. Polly's father died while you were so ill. We haven't told you before because it seemed best to wait until you were stronger."

"Oh, Mother, not Mr. Jameson! Why, he looked so well and strong. Don't you remember how jolly he was at the Christmas party?" Margery's eyes filled with tears that overflowed and rolled down her white cheeks. "And Polly, poor Polly!"

"He died very suddenly," Deborah said gently. "It was heart failure. He was such a kind man—such a good man. We will have to do all that we can to help Polly. His affairs have been left in a very involved state, too. It was worry they say that killed him. And I am afraid that there will be hard days, as well as sad ones, ahead for poor Polly."

The sad, pale girl in the sorrowful little black frock who came to see Margery a few days later was so different from the old buoyant, happy-go-lucky Polly that she felt embarrassed. Polly, however, was too sad to feel any embarrassment, and after she had talked of Margery's illness began to speak simply and from a full heart of her own sorrows.

"We'll have to rent the house, for the present, at any rate," she went on, after they had spoken of her father. "Old Mrs. Smith and her daughter are going to take it. And we are going away for the rest of the winter."

"Oh, Poll, where?"

"To Pine Lake. Mrs. Stenton, the friend of an old friend of Mother's supports a rest-home there for teachers and professional women who have broken down. Mother is to run the rest-home. She will get a salary for doing it, and of course it gives us a home beside. Mrs. Stenton is a very wealthy woman who is at the head of a big school for girls in New York State; she ——"

"Oh, but Polly, you don't have to go, too. Why don't you just stay here with me, and keep on at school?"

Polly got up and went to the window.

Margery watched her anxiously. Was Polly crying?

To Margery's relief Polly turned from the window at last. "Your grandfather asked me to do that," she murmured with trembling lips. "He wanted to educate me. He is so kind and good. But Mother is so sad, and seems so delicate. She is going to need me at Pine Lake. I'll have to go with her, and take care of her, and try to help to run things."

"But your education, Polly?" cried Margery. "What about your education? Oh, Polly, I don't see how you can possibly go to Pine Lake."

"I probably shan't be able to afford to go to college, anyway. And the girl who teaches the village school at Pine Lake will teach me some things. Besides, Mother needs me."

The trained nurse appeared with a tray. "Here is some cocoa for you two girls," she announced with a smile that seemed to say, "There must be no more serious conversation; it's bad for my patient."

"Pine Cottage is very pretty, they say," said Polly with an obvious effort to speak lightly,

" and there is a duck of a little sleeping cabin on the grounds for an overflow house."

After Polly left Margery learned more about her plans. The homelike old house in Renwyck's Town was to be rented furnished and in a week or so, Polly and her mother, who had been quite ill since her husband's death and who was still frail, were to leave for Pine Lake. There Mrs. Jameson was to have charge of the rest-house established by a Mrs. Stenton. She really needed Polly's assistance, and the care she lavished upon her. Mr. Morris was anxious to educate Polly, but after Mrs. Morris had talked with Mrs. Jameson, and realized how much she needed Polly, the plan was abandoned for the present.

There was so much for Polly to do in packing their things for Pine Lake, and arranging the house for the new tenants that she had but little time to realize the impending separation from Margery. But Margery realized it keenly. " If only I could go and pack for Polly and so be with her," she would wail. "It's awful having to stay stuck out here like some old mummy in a glass case! "

It fretted her especially when the time came for Polly's departure that she was not allowed to go to the station to say farewell.

"To think that I should ever come to this, when I have always been so active," she sighed to her father.

Her father laughed. "Poor old chip-chop, you sound as though you were eighty! Come, I'll carry you down-stairs, and you can write a letter to Polly to reach her almost as soon as she gets there."

He picked her up in his strong arms and carried her down to the little study at the back of the house. It was the first time she had been below stairs for many weary weeks.

In honor of Margery's convalescence, Mrs. Morris had brightened the room with gay chintzes and flowering plants in the windows.

"Hector has sent you in the finest pot of daffodils from the greenhouse," Mr. Morris pointed out, as he deposited Margery on the sofa, and poked up the fire.

"It would be dear in this little room if only Polly were here to run in and talk to me," Margery said despairingly.

Her father patted her shoulder sympathetically. "Yes, Malinda-Maria," he said, using the pet name he reserved for especially tender occasions, " I know it is hard for you, but think how bravely Polly is taking her troubles and worries."

Katie appeared at the door to call him to the telephone and he left the room.

Margery got up and went to the desk. " I mustn't be a whiner-weep when Polly is so brave," she thought as she got out a piece of paper, and dipped her pen in the ink. " But I do just wish that someone would come in to tell me how she got off."

She had trouble in collecting her thoughts. After while she got up and went to the window.

" I think someone might take the trouble to come in," she said half aloud.

She was staring disconsolately at a patch of snow that had lingered in the cold corner on the north side of the house. There was a ring at the front door-bell and a moment later she heard Dick's cheery voice.

" Oh, Dick," she cried, going out into the hall. " Did you see Polly off? Were there a lot of boys and girls there? How was she? Did she bear up all right? "

"Yes," answered Dick to all her questions, "and she sent you these," putting into her hands a bunch of violets. "She had a whole lot of stuff given to her, flowers and magazines and candy."

Margery dragged him back into the study with her without giving him time to get off his overcoat. "Now then," she commanded, pointing to a chair by the fire, and sinking down herself into a low rocking-chair, "tell me about it. Who was there?"

"As I was about to remark when I was interrupted," smiled Dick, taking off his coat and throwing it down on the old-fashioned lounge, "it is mighty nice to see you again—even if you do look a little white and thin. I haven't seen you since you went to work and got so ill and gave us such a scare. Well, as to Polly,—everyone was there. Sam was there, and Sally and Esther and Bill and the rest of the crowd. And old Dr. Huston and Teacher Rachel, and a lot of Mrs. Jameson's friends. Oh, they had a regular send-off. Great Scott, won't it seem queer not to have Polly? We sure will miss her!"

Margery stared into the fire and made no answer. She was feeling that the bottom had dropped out of life now that Polly had gone away.

CHAPTER VII

PINE TREES AND SHADY PATHS

THE March wind swept through the pine-tree tops, bending them sharply. But the sun shone down warm on the steps of the cottage where Polly sat staring sadly through a clearing in the pines at the waters of the lake rippled by the wind. In a clump of shrubbery by the veranda a song-sparrow sang its sweet canary-like song.

For her mother's sake Polly had borne bravely the breaking up of the beloved old home where she had lived all of her short life and where her grandmother and great-grandmother had lived before her. With a courage that was almost gay she had said good-bye to all her friends, but now that she was settled down to the quiet of Pine Lake she bitterly missed her happy, care-free home life, and her beloved, indulgent father.

Pine Cottage itself was a cheerful, pretty little house, well furnished and comfortable, but the five invalid ladies who composed the household were depressing. They were tired and nervous and querulous, and not in the frame of mind to have much sympathy with youth, even youth as sorrow-stricken and pathetic as was Polly's. One of them was quite young, a tall woman who would have been pretty but for her excessive thinness and pallor and her bitter, weary expression. Polly at first had admired her and had tried to make advances, but she found soon enough that Miss Stanley was the most faultfinding and hard to please of them all.

Bravely trying to make the best of things, Polly ran errands with cheerful alacrity until her feet grew as heavy as her heart; bore with outwardly serene patience the comments and suggestions about her appearance and manners, and learned to move and speak so quietly that not even the lightest of nappers had her rest disturbed. Mrs. Jameson was too crushed and sad to bear many burdens and Polly tried in every way she could to stand between her mother and the world, to help her with the housekeeping, and to keep the accounts, and most of all to sustain the courage that almost fell under the weight of grief.

"We'll just have to bear it, Mother," she would say, twining her arm around her mother's waist. "Father would want us to be brave, I know. Don't you remember how it worried him and made him unhappy for either of us to cry or be upset?

"And as for the practical burdens we'll just have to have courage. Don't you remember how, when the Count of Monte Cristo was thrown into the sea, tied up in a sack, he managed somehow, sack and all, to swim to shore and climbing up on the rocks, how he shouted, 'The world is mine'?

"Well, what are five cranky ladies to me? I'm going to climb up on the rock in spite of them and shout, 'The world is mine.'"

For all her brave words, Polly often slipped away to a quiet spot in the woods where a cedar-water stream stole silently along over its sandy bed, and there crouched on a fallen tree-trunk she would cry her heart out. But only the birds and the whispering pines ever knew, for her storm of grief over, Polly would wash away the tear-stains in the cold, golden-brown water of the brook and go back to the house calm and smiling.

She felt especially sad and discouraged this March morning and although it was time for her to start to school, she lingered on the steps leaning her head wearily against the hand-rail. The pine-needles at her feet seemed moving, and idly Polly leaned forward to investigate. A tiny lizard, about six inches long, colored in brown with a brilliant blue stripe down each side, was crawling through the brown needles, brought out from its winter home in the sand by the warm spring sunshine. It was a tiny pine-tree swift, lineal descendant of the reptile monsters that inhabited the earth before man came, and which lingers on in the worm fences, stone heaps and pine-trees of southern New Jersey.

Some of the girls she knew were afraid of the tiny things, or affected to be, but Polly had often perched happily on some fence top watching with amusement a little swift darting at the insect visitors to some gorgeous, orange-red blossoms of a butterfly weed growing close to the fence.

" Dick says the swift has three eyes," she thought idly. " One on top of its head."

She put forth her hand to catch the tiny animal by his long scaly tail. With a quick turn the swift miraculously disjointed himself from his tail and scuttling off, left Polly very much astonished with it in her hands.

Laughing, she remembered that Dick had warned her never to catch one so, but to make a noose of a long wiry piece of glass, and slip it over the little creature's head. Somehow cheered by the funny little thing and its detachable tail, she rose and went down the sandy path toward the road that led to the little country school where she was studying.

At first it had been decided that Miss Martin, the young teacher but lately graduated from the State Normal School, was to give her private lessons after school hours. But Miss Martin found that in mathematics Polly was not much in advance of some of her elder pupils and persuaded her to attend the little school. Mrs. Jameson felt that it was better for Polly to be away from Pine Cottage for part of the day, and so too urged that she should go.

"It will do you good to have the walk, dear," she had insisted. "And it will broaden your experience to know a little country school and the children who go there."

So Polly had gone. Miss Martin, seeing her an eager scholar, had allowed her to study much her own way, and often while the little ones were learning their geography lessons she took the occasion to coach Polly in Latin.

This morning as Polly went along the woodland path she tried to keep her mind on her algebra and not to think about home and what would be happening there this beautiful spring morning. She could see the old streets of Renwyck's Town, the fronts of the old red-brick, or yellow-painted frame houses, shining in the sunshine. Here and there in sheltered corners of the old box-bordered gardens the snowdrops would be blooming and a hardy crocus or two. In the river the shad would be "running" and the fishermen going out. How many spring mornings old Jake, the fishman, would appear with a fresh catch of shad for sale and Polly would follow Missouri the colored cook out to his wagon to help her select the biggest and most silvery-scaled one and to stand chatting with Jake in the warm spring sunshine. And Jake would have so many quaint anecdotes and wise saws that Polly would be almost late to school, and catching up her books would have to run. And at the school gate she would find other boys and girls, who, beguiled by the sunshine and spring languor, were also almost late.

The little path of glistening white sand led through a thicket of laurel bushes, before long to be a mass of pink and white bloom, and out to the road by the lake. By the water's edge she stopped, her eyes too full of tears to see where she was going.

" They are all in school now," she thought forlornly, " Dick and Margery and Sam and Sally, and all of them. And I'm here alone."

Above her head came the shrill brave piping of the little tree-frog, the hyla. She glanced up, forgetting for the moment, and anxious to see if she could discover the queer, ugly, disk-toed little gnome. But he remained invisible, and she could only notice that the damp thickets by the stream had suddenly been tinted over by a yellow haze. The spice-bush, that forerunner of spring, was in flower. She paused to look at the tiny yellow blossoms nestling close to the bare brown branches and to sniff the faint, spicy odor. Breaking off a twig or two, and thrusting it in the front of her ulster, she went on her way. Beyond the pine woods, out in the open country, the maples were bursting into crimson tips, and the farmers were burning piles of dry brush that filled the air with a pleasant, faintly acrid smell.

" William would be making a fire like that in the garden at home," Polly thought sadly.

A meadow-lark perched on a fence stake was singing, its limpid, simple notes full of careless happiness and hope. With its peculiar rapid, noiseless action of its wings it flew on, lighted on another stake and sang again, its song as sweet, as alert, as remonstrating, as though it were saying, " Don't you understand? Don't you see that nice things are going to happen? "

So Polly read it, at any rate, and with a braver heart, she turned down the crossroad that led to the school, the dreary, unpainted little square building, standing in the middle of a hard, bare patch of ground.

" Ugh, ugly, ugly," she sighed. " Imagine if Margery could see me now! "

With another sigh she opened the sagging, battered door and went in.

In the little vestibule she stopped to take off her hat and coat and to hang them up with the others already there. Inside the schoolhouse it was even drearier than it was outside. The door led directly into the schoolroom, a good-sized room with larger windows that had possibilities of pleasantness. But the woodwork was painted an ugly dull pink and was mottled and peeling, and the walls were papered with a large figured design in dingy chocolate-color that had faded in streaks. From the windows, which were without shutters or shades, a garish light flooded the room, and pitilessly revealed every scratch on the little old melodeon with a broken-backed dictionary on its top, and seemed to search out every detail of hideousness of the great, circular iron stove in the corner. Only a picture of Lincoln pinned up back of the teacher's desk, and the scrupulous cleanliness of the room redeemed it at all. Polly had already come to appreciate its neatness and the price at which it was purchased, for the young teacher, a pretty girl of about twenty, frail and over-anxious, had to act as janitor and start the fire and clean the room herself.

The pupils of the school came chiefly from the families of the Italian fruit and vegetable growers near by and from the children of the various employees of the Inn at Pine Lake and the boarding-houses as well as from a colony of Russian Jews a mile and a half south of the lake. The fruit-growers were a thrifty, industrious people, living happy, busy lives in their queer little houses, painted bright pink or blue in imitation of those of the land they had left behind them, or sometimes living three or four families in one big old Colonial mansion that had descended from more prosperous days. Polly had noticed their wonderfully neat and healthy gardens, where by intensive gardening so much was grown in such small plots of ground. Early in the spring as it was, the strawberry beds were already looking like neat green ribbons stretching across fields of white sand, the little fruit trees had their trunks whitewashed in defense of insects, and every inch of ground seemed swept and garnished. She liked the children in the school, too, especially one girl of about her own age, Rosa Bonini, a gentle creature whose big brown eyes and sweet olive-tinted face reminded her of some of the photographs of the old masters that had hung in the drawing-room at home. The boys, too, with their snapping black eyes and wide grins amused her, although she felt that they were rather inclined to be too familiar. The little children had already made friends with her, and would cluster about her at recess, stroking the soft sleeve of her blouse, or smoothing the big butterfly bow that dangled at the end of her long pigtail.

Polly had never seen the Russian colony, but she had heard that it had been founded by a philanthropic New Yorker at the time of the Jewish persecutions in Russia when so many fled to America, and that there under almost ideal conditions, away from the grime and congestion of the big cities, in cheerful buildings in a pleasant country, the clothing was manufactured that later was sold in the New York shops.

But Polly guessed that the old habits of unhappiness and unrest were too strong to be broken, even in the happy new environment. The older boys and girls seemed both aggressive and sullen and only the little children appeared to her to be normal. These she drew about her as she drew the other children, and their endless chatter about " me mudder " and the doings of their families, often made her forget her own heartaches.

The oldest of the girls from the colony, Ada Tolschudy, both interested and repelled her. About eighteen, small and wiry, with a large nose and black eyes that seemed burning with scorn and resentment, she revealed force and personality. Her father was the superintendent of the clothing factory, and being better to do than the others of the colony and with a hunger for education for himself and his family, he kept Ada at school long after the other girls of her age had gone to work. She was an apt scholar and Polly was amazed to find her far better read than even she herself was. Ada had evidently absorbed every book her hands had chanced to light on. Few of the fruit growers associated with any of the clothing colony, but Ada had somehow managed to learn Italian, and she went about among the fruit farms where she had made herself a welcome visitor.

"Somehow," Miss Martin had confided to Polly, "I doubt if she is a very good person for them to know. I think that she stirs up trouble wherever she goes. And she seems to feel so bitter against everyone who is better off than she is. She has the idea that she is oppressed and held down. Though I really think that anybody who tried to oppress Ada Tolschudy would have a pretty hard job of it!"

As Polly sat down at her desk, Rosa Bonini held out an orange to her. "My uncle," she said softly, "he senda me this. He hasa da fruit store."

Polly smiled her thanks, and put the orange away in her desk until recess should come. As she put down the desk lid she caught Ada Tolschudy's eye. Ada turned her head away with a jerk and scowled at the blackboard. Polly felt a little nervous shiver go down her back as though something in Ada's expression were an augury of unhappiness or misfortune.

"Nonsense, what a goose I am," she thought, annoyed at herself, and with a shrug opened her Latin grammar and began to study.

CHAPTER VIII

DISCOURAGEMENT

A FLOCK of red-winged blackbirds, brilliant, shining black with scarlet epaulets, settled down on the lawn. Margery, well wrapped up in a steamer chair in a sunny corner of the brick terrace by the library windows, watched them with envious interest. She felt so tired and languid and the flight of the birds seemed so easy.

"Wouldn't you love to be a bird and fly?" she asked little Benjamin Ball, who had come to call upon her.

"I'd rather be an elephant and pick up peanuts with my nose," answered Benjie, not raising his eyes from the fairy-book he had found more absorbing than Margery's society.

Margery laughed, and screwing round in her chair, watched her father and mother as they walked slowly up and down the path that led to the garden gate. They had been often of late lost in some deep, serious talk, but so listless and self-absorbed had Margery been that to-day for the first time it occurred to her to wonder what they were talking about.

"Is anything wrong?" she thought anxiously.

Crawling out of the four steamer rugs, two carriage robes and an overcoat with which her father had anchored her to the chair she rose shakily to her feet and stole across the grass to her parents.

"Hello," she gasped rather huskily into their ears.

They turned with a start. "Hello, darling," her mother answered hastily. "We were just speaking of you."

"Saying, I hope," returned Margery, hanging onto her father's arm, "that 'dear little Margery is such an angel child that she really needs a larger allowance and that it's a shame to warp her sweet disposition by making her eat porridge and take tonics.'"

"We were saying," teased Mr. Morris, "what a splendid thing it would be for Margery if she were to get up every morning at five o'clock and help Peter to milk the cows. And then of course she ought to cook the breakfast. And what a good thing an exclusive diet of corn-meal mush would be for her."

"I will if you will," Margery laughed. "Especially the corn-meal mush part," she added, well knowing that after a memorable hunting trip on which supplies had been reduced for some time to corn-meal, her father had had little liking for that delicacy.

Mrs. Morris beamed. "You are getting better," she declared.

But Mr. Morris had grown suddenly serious. "What we were saying, Margery, was how happy and protected you are here, and how different is the fate of so many girls in war-torn Belgium and France."

Margery sighed. "Oh, dear," she said, "can't we forget that old war for a little while? Listen to that song-sparrow instead."

Her father smiled absently. "The war won't let us forget it."

They strolled on to the garden and stood looking in over the gate. In sheltered corners the forsythia was already yellow and the crocuses were gayly yellow and purple in the grass borders.

"I declare, there's a daffodil in bloom," cried Mrs. Morris. "'The daffodil that takes the winds of March before the swallow dares.' Spring is here at last."

"And I'm going back to school next week," declared Margery suddenly.

"That depends," protested her mother.

"Oh, Mother! I just can't stand it! I'm so tired of doing nothing. It's awful to just sit around the house all the time and do nothing but coddle one's self. Besides, I am ever so well now. See how strongly I'm walking," and Margery inflated her chest and strode manfully along the path.

Mr. Morris laughed but did not seem to be especially convinced.

"Well, then," said Margery, realizing a lack of enthusiasm, "let's walk down to the front gate and I'll show you."

"Do you think you'd better, dear? And what about Benjie?"

"Oh, he's lost in that old book of mine. He's all right, Mother—he's well wrapped up."

It was pleasant in the March sunshine and Margery had two willing arms to lean upon;

nevertheless she was tired by the time she had reached the gate at the end of the avenue and the walk back to the house seemed endless. To her relief, just as they reached the portico steps she spied Esther and Sally turning in at the gate and she was able to slip into her chair without confessing how tired she felt.

"Hello, girls," she beamed. "I can't begin to tell you how glad I am to see you." And she smiled all the more cordially because of the small joke that she kept to herself.

Esther had brought a letter from Polly. Margery took it and spread it out on her knee to hide the fact that her hand trembled from weakness. "Now, Margery," she told herself sternly, "just because you're a little tired you mustn't say die yet."

She bent her head over the letter. "Dearest girls," it began, "here I am, the funniest looking thing after the dirtiest ride you can imagine. The little old train was so hot from a huge stove in one corner of the car that we had to open the window; and then the cinders came in. They settled into deep shadows under my eyes, with the result that in spite of lots of scrubbing, I look like the lady in Stevenson's 'St. Ives,' 'no what you would call bonny, but aye pale, penetratin', and interestin'.' "

It was a brave little letter but the girls were able to read between the lines the depression and loneliness. They discussed it for a while, even fly-away Sally, sympathetic and subdued, then as Esther was due at home to coerce her little brother Jimmie into the bathtub, and to bed, if not to sleep, and as Sally had two days' undone lessons hanging over her head, the visitors left. After they had gone, Margery sat thoughtfully looking at a great white cloud that appeared to be resting on the elm-tree by the gate, and thought of Polly. How often she had seen her and her old horse Spy turn in at that gate. And now Polly was at Pine Lake and lonely, and she was here and lonely.

"I wish that there was something I could do for her," she thought, "something really big."

Time hung heavily on Margery's hands and she had trouble in amusing herself. Her eyes were weak after her illness, and she could not read for any length of time. Besides, she had been read to until she had mental indigestion.

"I've read stories and stories and stories," she cried one afternoon when her grandfather had suggested that she read something. "My mind feels all frothy."

"Rest a while from reading then," her grandfather had counselled. "And then try Stevenson's 'Kidnapped.' Its clear bracing wholesomeness will restore your mind as much as the Highlands he writes of would restore your body."

"Why don't you do something—er—well, domestic, Angel-lamb," suggested her father, puffing thoughtfully at his pipe. "That would be good for you. You might make a cake, or a dress, or a—or a bonnet, you know," he finished vaguely.

"There is lovely, lovely pink lawn upstairs, Margery," remarked her mother. "You can have that for a frock to make. I'll help you cut it out and fit it and you can do the sewing."

But even with her mother's and Sarah's help, Margery grew tired over her sewing. The needle seemed a special instrument invented solely to torture weary fingers, and her nerves became as ruffled as the frock was intended to be. The doctor, finding her flushed and excited over "those horrid old gore things," forbade any more dressmaking.

So with her music; piano and nerves jangled together, and when under Kiley's directions she undertook to increase her knowledge of cooking, she flavored her pies with salt tears, and grew faint over veal cutlets. "Culinary culture," as her father took to calling it, was disposed of by parental decree, and she decided to turn her attention to gardening.

"The ground is still damp," objected the doctor. "I won't have any gardening, my dear. If you want to make mud pies you'll have to go down to Atlantic City and play on the beach with your bucket and shovel."

"I'm much too old for that sort of thing," declared Margery loftily to the doctor's back as he hurried off.

"Cheer up, Kitty-cat," laughed her father, "we'll have to send you away, and get those pretty eyes so that they can see a joke again—even harmless little jokes like the good doctor's."

But the trip to Atlantic City failed through a heavy storm that kept her cooped up in the big hotel where she grew bored and listless. When the sun appeared at last and she ventured out, the damp sea-winds depressed her, and she wrenched her ankle getting out of a wheel-chair on the board walk.

" There isn't one solitary thing on earth that I can do," she told Dr. Huston solemnly the day after her arrival home. " Think of anyone going to Atlantic City and not having a good time! You might just as well let me go back to school. I won't be any worse off there than I am anywhere else."

The doctor took off his glasses and thoughtfully tapped the end of his nose with them. " Yes," he said at length, " we might try it, and if that doesn't do, you will have to have a more radical change of climate. I'd have sent you off long ago, if it hadn't been for your father's plans, er—er—what do you hear from Polly?" he finished abruptly.

If the doctor had doubts about school, Margery had none and it was with high hopes that she set off the following Monday morning for the red-brick building of the Renwyck's Town Friends' School.

As the car stopped at the gate, Sally Watson spied her and with a cry, "There's Margery," came flying out to meet her.

Sam Bennet followed, and behind him came Dick in his usual calmly deliberate fashion.

"It's so perfect to be back," Margery found herself saying again and again to teachers and scholars.

But as the morning wore on and she found her strength growing less and less, she began to doubt its perfection. The long stairs up which she had been used to skip unconcernedly twenty times a day seemed a veritable Matterhorn to climb, and their descent was such a strain on wobbly knees and a head that would swim dismally that she would have been almost willing to have parted with one of her pretty front teeth, or half of her curls, for the privilege of sliding down the banisters.

Fortunately she was not asked to recite in any of her classes but was able to sit back with a strained smile, intended to represent alert and intelligent interest.

"I'll never be able to catch up, never, never," she whispered to Dick. "Never."

"Hmmm?" answered Dick absently. He was absorbed in scanning a difficult verse of

Virgil which he firmly believed the maliciousness of fate would force him to translate in class.

Margery's eyes filled with tears, and she gathered her books together with trembling hands as she made ready once more to toil up the stairs. She was not one of those sensitive mortals whose hurt feelings must bounce up like a Jack-in-the-box at all times and places to complicate life for themselves and others, but to-day she felt strangely upset by Dick's apparent indifference.

She grew more and more weary as the morning wore on, and at the twelve o'clock recess she was only saved from the ignominy of bursting into tears before everyone by escaping to the seclusion of the back hall before anyone spied her but Teacher Rachel.

"Thee is too tired, child," said Teacher Rachel, substituting her own dainty lavender-scented handkerchief for the drenched square of linen with which Margery was mopping her eyes. "I'm going to telephone for thy car to come and get thee."

A brief spin home in the car, and Margery, tired and dazed, found herself in bed almost before she knew what had happened. “ It’s all right,” she murmured to her anxious mother; “ I’ll be better to-morrow.”

The next morning she did seem so much better that it was decided she might make another attempt at school.

But the second day was even more of a failure than the first, and by half-past eleven Margery was rolling home in the car, thoroughly dismayed.

“ It’s so—so—ignominious,” she wailed to the doctor when he came in to inspect her that afternoon.

“ Better be ignominious than dead,” replied the doctor cheerfully.

“ Oh, doctor, I’ve got to get back. I can’t lose so much school! ”

“ Time isn’t ripe yet. Better to wait for things until they get ripe. Now a peach is delicious fruit—when it’s ripe. But it’s hard and sour when it’s green. That’s the way with lots of things in life—fine when they are ripe—but no use having until then.”

That the doctor had discussed the matter further with her father and mother grew apparent to Margery when she found them busy over railroad folders and advertisements of southern health resorts.

"It isn't a bit of use taking me south," she sighed, picking up a picture of a purple-cheeked young woman smirking at a young man in checked riding breeches. "I'll never look like that female, so what's the use?"

"The doctor thinks it would be better for you to be in a milder climate," answered Mrs. Morris, her pretty young face looking rather drawn and worried. "Then you can be out of doors all the time. We haven't decided where we ought to go—but these advertisements of Asheville look attractive."

With a little reviving interest, Margery picked up another booklet. "I suppose it might be rather nice to get away," she said listlessly.

Later in the day she went into her mother's room. "Do you know, Mother," she began, sitting down on the bed, "that I am beginning to get excited about going away. No, really, I'm not rumpling the counterpane. I'm sitting down very carefully. Perhaps I would feel better if I got away from Renwyck's Town."

"Yes, dear, I am sure you would," answered Mrs. Morris, noting with a fresh pang of anxiety Margery's pale cheeks and air of languor. "I ought to have taken you south before this—the doctor wanted it. I reproach myself that I didn't do it. But so many things—I was torn both ways——" Her broken sentences stopped irresolutely.

Margery drew up her knees and clasped her hands around her ankles in a favorite if inelegant attitude. "Do you know," she said, "what I'd like to do down south? I'd like to ride horseback again. I think I'd feel lots better if I could get on a horse. Couldn't Papa get horses, and then we could ride together? It will be fun to be such a lot with Papa, won't it? Somehow, with school and everything, I haven't been the chums with Papa this winter that I'd expected to be. And he is such a sweet lamb, Mother. The sweetest, lambiest kind of a lamb."

"Sweet lamb," laughed Mrs. Morris. "What a disrespectful way to speak of your father, child!"

"Well, you know he is the sweetest father anybody ever had."

Mrs. Morris's hands trembled slightly as she put down the pile of freshly laundered clothes she had been mending.

"Margery, dear," she said slowly, "Papa won't be able to go down south with us."

"Oh, Mother, why not? Can't he leave business? It would do him lots of good."

"No, dear, it isn't that. I haven't said anything to you about it before for various reasons. But it has finally been definitely decided that Papa is to go to France."

"To France? Why, Mother! He can't go to France—there's a war there!"

"Yes, dear, that is why he is going."

Margery stared at her mother with horror-stricken eyes. "Oh, Mother, he isn't going to fight?" she whispered.

"No, dear; to drive an ambulance. There is so much suffering. And we must do what we can to help. Your father is one of those who can help. We are not dependent upon him for money, and his business does not need him just now. I know how he feels—and—and—I sympathize. But, oh, Margery—it is hard to say 'go.'"

With a despairing gesture of her hand, Margery threw herself forward and buried her head in the pillow. "I feel," she said in a strangled voice, "as though the bottom were always dropping out of life."

CHAPTER IX

LETTERS

THE post-office of Pine Lake was a quaint little place. Above it a great red maple stretched its limbs, and close to its gray-shingled walls crept laurel and spice bushes. The road that skirted the lake passed it, but Polly had discovered a little path that wound from the cottage through the woods to the little bridge just at the right of the post-office. The little path led through a thicket of flowering spicewood and low-growing oaks, their tiny spring leaves brilliant as any flowers, dark hollies and laurel, past a narrow creeping cedar water stream and a tiny bog where later the sweet swamp magnolia would bloom. In a sheltered nook she had discovered a great clump of arbutus coming into flower. " When the arbutus is really out," she would say to herself, " I'll send some to Margery."

Inside the post-office was a tiny store, where post-cards and a few groceries could be bought, as well as some candies of ancient lineage and long descent.

One morning after school Polly strolled along the path to the post-office. It was one of those warm days that come so unexpectedly in the early spring, when the sun shines down with the heat of June and the sky is brilliantly blue and cloudless. Winter clothes are too heavy and spring ones have not yet been bought or unpacked from cedar chests. And beyond the physical discomforts one feels restless and vaguely unhappy.

Polly felt languid and with her languor there was a restlessness. Her black frock depressed her, and she was homesick. "If only I could get back to Renwyck's Town," she sighed. "If only I could get away from Pine Lake."

To comfort herself she tried to make herself believe that her homesickness was only spring restlessness. She remembered the quotation on the picture of the Canterbury Pilgrims that hung in the dining-room at home. "In time of spring when langen folk to gang on pilgrimages."

"If only something would happen. I wish

there were fairies—and that one would come along and offer three wishes to me."

She stopped to watch a leaf floating down the little stream, then she went on to the post-office, where she found a number of letters for Pine Cottage waiting in the box. Dutifully she took them back to the cottage and put them in the letter-box by the hall door, but her own letters she slipped into her sweater pocket without opening them.

Letters had been her consolation and joy, but to-day she felt that she could scarcely stand them. They would tell of things at home; school and the boys and girls, and of the good times in which she had no share. When the afternoon session of school was over, perhaps, and the day was cooler, she would be able to open and read them.

The last stretch of the walk to the school was unshaded and hot, and Polly was warm and discouraged when she entered the stuffy little schoolroom and took her place at her desk. The sun glared in at the unshaded windows; the children were restless, and as Polly looked about her at the dark foreign faces—so different from the aristocratic young people with whom she had hitherto gone to school—a passion of disgust seized her. How she hated it all: Ada Tolschudy's brilliant red waist that seemed all the redder this warm day; Rosa Bonini's munching of fruit behind her book while the juice dripped down the front of her dress; Guiseppe Bellini's wide, impudent grin. In the corner two boys laughed and talked regardless of Miss Martin's repeated requests for quiet, and in the front of the room the little children squirmed uneasily, and the smallest of them burst into tears because the boy next to him had taken his pencil. Polly looked up impatiently. Why didn't Miss Martin put a stop to all this noise and confusion? Teacher Rachel would have had the room quiet in just about two minutes. Why didn't Miss Martin stop it?

She glanced frowningly toward the teacher's desk. Miss Martin pushed her hair wearily off her forehead, and Polly noted how white and tired she looked.

" Poor thing," she thought compassionately, " she has one of those dreadful headaches she told me she gets sometimes. If it is bad here for me, it's twenty times worse for her."

Slipping quietly to the front of the room, Polly drew near to Miss Martin's desk.

"It's awful in here," she began.

"Well, I can't help it," Miss Martin snapped. "You'll just have to stand it."

"The children are so restless," Polly went on.

Miss Martin suspected criticism. "Of course they are in this heat," she said sharply. "I wish you would go back to your desk and not come to me making a fuss over nothing."

For a moment the relationship of teacher and pupil was lost and they were simply two tired and nervous young girls.

Polly flushed. "I was just going to suggest," she said with dignity, "that I take the little ones outside and tell them stories or teach them. That will give you a chance to manage the older ones in here. To look after them is a big enough job for one person on a day like this."

Miss Martin's face relaxed. "Oh, would you do that?" she sighed. "It would be such a help."

She leaned forward and with her hand on her bell ordered the younger children out of the room. The older ones she told to draw near the desk for a history lesson.

Out-of-doors Polly found there was no spot on the hard, bare school-ground where they could sit in comfort, and the sun broiled down on the school steps. Across the road in an angle of the worm fence around a field stood an ancient juniper tree with a log under it. Hither Polly marshalled her young charges and with them close about her began her story.

It was cooler here and peaceful, and the children with their big or dark eyes fixed upon her were appealing. The Bonini boy climbed into her lap and went to sleep with his dark head against her shoulder. Polly, gathering him closer in her arms, thought how much he looked like the bambinos in the old masters. Beside her on the log sat a little Russian Jewess, her dark curls standing out like a cloud about the vivid little face, radiant with this new departure from school routine.

"You know so, it is wonderful to know," she murmured, and Polly forgot her loneliness and depression, the heat and languor, in a thrill of pleasure.

She actually found herself feeling sorry

IT WAS COOLER HERE AND PEACEFUL.

when school was over. Ada Tolschudy joined her and walked down to the turn of the road. She talked bitterly about the " rich "; somehow the rich were responsible for all the discomforts she endured from the heat and depression of the day. For, she pointed out, were not the " rich " flying about the countryside cool and at ease. It was only their selfishness, she seemed to think, that kept her from having a motor, too. " They don't want nobody to have nothing, the rich don't," she grumbled. " They just want it all for themselves. But wait until the poor people get things into their own hands—then they will have everything, and the rich won't have anything! "

Polly roused herself from the thoughts that were absorbing her mind. " Won't they be just as bad as the rich are now? " she laughed.

Ada made no answer but went on with her grumbling, most of it now in an undertone.

At the crossroads she left and Polly hurried down the path until she came to a quiet nook where a great fallen tree lay beside one of the innumerable little streams of cedar water emptying into the lake. Here she plumped down and drew the letters from her pocket,—

she felt like reading them now. She opened Margery's letter first and spread it out on her knee.

" Polly, dear," it began, " I should have answered your dear letter before this, but so much has been happening. In the first place, when I tried to go back to school, I wasn't well enough. You can't imagine how awfully I felt! Finally, when I burst right out crying in class like a big baby, the doctor said that I would have to give up all attempt at studying and go away from Renwyck's Town. We were going down to Asheville—but then, oh, Polly, dear, what do you suppose—it has been decided that Papa is to go to France to drive an ambulance. You know how he and Mamma feel about the war, and I suppose that it is the right thing for him to do. It's awfully brave of him, isn't it? By the time this reaches you he will have started.

" Now for my other piece of news. Somehow, with Papa away,I haven't the heart to go down to Asheville, and Mamma doesn't want to be so far away from Grandpapa, either. So I have persuaded the doctor—what do you think?—to let me go to Pine Lake, and so be near you! We 'phoned over to the Inn there, and engaged rooms, and we are going over there on Thursday. And, oh, Polly, it will be so nice to be with you! I have missed you so, I ——"

Polly did not wait to finish the letter. It was enough that Margery was coming to Pine Lake. She was to come on Thursday—to-day was Thursday, and it was already growing late in the afternoon! Perhaps she was already at the Inn. Polly jumped to her feet and began to half run, half slide along the path, slippery with pine-needles. The Inn was on the other side of the club-house, beyond the club-house. Stopping at Pine Cottage just long enough to call the good news in through the open door to her mother, she hurried on her way.

She was quite breathless by the time she reached the driveway of the Inn. After the glare of the sunshine, the big hotel hallway, with its dark polished floor and old mahogany furniture seemed very dim, and she had almost to feel her way to the desk at the opposite end.

"Are Mrs. Morris and her daughter here yet?" she gasped to the businesslike young woman sitting there.

The young woman calmly inspected the ledger. "Yes," she said, "just as though the Morrises weren't anybody at all," Polly thought indignantly.

"Yes," went on the young woman, touching a bell, "they came half an hour ago."

A white-capped maid appeared, and as Polly explained her errand led the way up a low winding flight of stairs and down a long corridor lined on either side with white doors, to a room at the end.

"Come in," cried someone as the maid knocked.

The maid opened the door and withdrew.

Polly stepped into a big airy room, the wide windows of which gave a vista of the lake, ruffled down by a sudden little breeze passing over it. Anxiously she looked about her. Where was Margery?

There was the flash of a pink kimono in the doorway of the next room, and a soft cry. A warm cheek was pressed to hers and she found herself in Margery's loving arms.

CHAPTER X

STUMBLING-BLOCKS AND STEPPING-STONES

"Polly," said Mrs. Jameson, coming out to the veranda, "you really must stop cracking those nuts with your teeth, at once. Really, dear, after the care I have always taken of your teeth for you to do a thing like that!"

"It's very ungrateful, isn't it? 'Sharper than a serpent's tooth is an ungrateful child.' Perhaps it would be more to the point if I said, Sharper than a serpent's tail is a toothless child."

Mrs. Jameson laughed, and sat down on the step beside her tall daughter. "I believe Margery has done you good; you seem more like the old Polly."

"Isn't it wonderful," said Polly thoughtfully, trying to crack a nut with the heel of her shoe, "how just one person can change a whole place for one? Margery has made Pine Lake over for me."

"Poor Margery," sighed Mrs. Jameson, "it must be very hard on her to be so inactive."

Margery was still frail and weak, and a large part of her days had to be spent lying in a steamer chair in a sheltered corner of the Inn veranda, where she could breathe the sweet resinous air of the pine woods, and listen to the soughing of the gentle wind in the tall trees. As soon as school was over Polly would hurry to her, and then if the day were fine they would go for a stroll around the lake and along the little woodsy paths where the wild flowers were springing. Now and then they would go rowing on the lake in the clumsy white-painted boat belonging to the Inn, or if the day was cold they would sit in Margery's big sunny bedroom where the windows opened on the lake and dark pines beyond, and Mrs. Morris would read aloud while the girls knitted sweaters and mittens for the Belgian children.

As Margery grew stronger she drifted into the habit of walking down the road to meet Polly at the close of school. Occasionally she went a little early, and slipping quietly into the schoolhouse would wait on one of the back benches for the last recitation to be over. Her coming was always hailed as something of an advent by the scholars, who regarded her, with her yellow curls and her daintiness, as something of a princess. After school was over the littlest ones would cluster about her, squabbling among themselves for the privilege of holding her hand. The older children were more reserved, and Ada eyed her with open suspicion.

However, Ada always wanted to walk home with Polly and Margery, when she would pour out the bitterness of her soul.

"Look how the rich keep us down!" she would cry to ears that were too busy listening to the song-sparrows to heed her.

"Umm, yes," Margery would reply absently. "Just look at this funny little bird's-foot violet. It's the first one I've seen this year."

"That's always the way with people in this stupid, wicked country," Ada cried vehemently one day when Margery was unusually interested in the wayside treasures she found. "You think more about flowers and birds and stuff like that than you do about your fellowbeings and their sufferings. You are just as bad as everybody else here!"

Margery scarcely heard this slap at herself in her indignation at the term, "stupid, wicked country."

"Don't you love your country?" she cried.

"How can you love a country if it isn't lovely?"

"Not lovely? America not lovely?" Margery opened amazed eyes. "Why, it's perfectly lovely. It's the most wonderful country in the world!"

"Oh, yes, for you rich people, but not for the poor. What does it do for us? Not one earthly thing—you rich people get everything, education and comfort and everything."

"You get education," answered Margery with dignity. "Unless I happen to be very much mistaken, you are on the way home from school now."

"Yes," cried Ada, "what kind of a school is it? That ugly, dreary little building. You wouldn't go to a school like that!"

"I go," interposed Polly. "And Margery isn't strong enough to go to any school just now."

"And what do you do for the school?" questioned Margery. "What do you do to make it better? Or even to make it look nice? Nothing but throw peanut shells on the floor! I saw you do that very thing to-day. If people can't take care of what they have they can't expect to get something better."

Ada murmured something inarticulate.

"And what do you do for your country besides grumbling at it?"

"It doesn't do much for me," returned Ada sullenly.

"It gives you an education free, for one thing," put in Polly. "That's one thing the country you despise so much does for you. Mrs. Morris is reading Mary Antin aloud to us. You just ought to hear about the way Mary Antin couldn't get any education in Russia at all."

Margery lifted her head proudly. She felt that Polly had fairly cornered Ada now.

Ada was silent for a moment. "Oh, well," she said at length, shrugging her shoulders, "maybe you can do something to make things better; you're rich. I can't do anything."

"You can do just as much as we can. Every bit as much. Look at Lincoln. He was poor and unknown, and yet when he went to New Orleans as a boy and saw a slave girl there being sold, he said, 'If ever I get a chance to hit that thing, I'm going to hit it hard.' And look what he did!"

"I love the countree," put in Rosa Bonini in her gentle voice. "But there is mooch I do not understand. Is there any way I can learn to understand? It is so hard in America to understand. It is so mooch different in Italy. What is right in Italy is not right here and they laugh at me."

"They laugh at you because they think they're smart," said Ada. "They're rich ——"

"I don't think you understand, Ada," interrupted Margery, "not even as much as Rosa does."

They had reached the crossroads and the four girls stopped and looked at one another thoughtfully before they parted. Rosa and Ada were only conscious of Polly's and Margery's air of refinement and daintiness; Rosa with admiration and Ada with resentment, while Margery and Polly regarded the other two girls with interest and a certain curiosity.

"Isn't it strange that anybody should have such queer ideas as Ada?" remarked Margery as they turned down the path toward the hotel. "Wouldn't it be depressing to feel so bitter? Oh, I hope there is a letter from Dick waiting for me when I get back to the hotel. It certainly would seem nice after Ada to have a little refreshing Renwyck's Town news."

Instead of a letter from Dick, she found old Dr. Huston in person.

"Oh, doctor," she hailed him eagerly, "I'm so glad to see you! Now I can go back to school."

But after the doctor had felt her pulse and tested her lungs, had made her say, "Ah, ah, ah," and turned her face toward the light streaming in at the big window, and had asked her any number of apparently useless questions after the manner of doctors, he said briskly:

"Well, little girl, Pine Lake is a pretty good sort of place. I think that you would better stay here for a while longer. You aren't quite ready for school yet."

"It isn't fair," Margery declared the next afternoon as she and Polly were drifting about the lake in the old white boat. " Everybody else but us is strong and doing things. Jane and Esther and Dick and Perry and everybody. They are all having a fine time. And here you and I are stuck down in the woods to vegetate." She stopped and scowled at a duck swimming toward land. " It isn't fair," she repeated.

Polly's sorrow had taught her a gentle patience, new to the high-spirited, eager girl. " Do you remember, Margery," she asked gently, " that day when we went to the woods to get Christmas greens?"

" Do I?" sighed Margery. " Wasn't it perfect? It seems like a thousand years ago, doesn't it?" And she dipped her oar so deep that a shower of drops spattered over Polly.

" Whoa there, Margery; don't drown me! Well, do you remember how cold and dark and dreary it got in the woods and how the owl scared you?"

They both laughed and Polly went on. "And remember how glad we were to get out of the woods and into the open country again. We forget that when we look back and only remember the nice things."

"That's so," Margery admitted. "When I look back, I can scarcely remember anything but the fun we had."

"Well, that's the way it will be some day about here at Pine Lake. We'll just remember the fun we had ——"

"Some day, I suppose we'll howl over Ada Tolschudy, and all the fussy ladies at Pine Cottage and ——"

But Polly wasn't through yet. "Yes, oh, yes," she said vaguely, "but to go back to that day in the pine-barrens. Don't you remember how we talked about the difficulties at that time, and how we said that the woods were just like life, and that we all had to go through them at some time or other? Well, we are in the woods now, figuratively and literally. We can't see anything but trees and we can't realize that there are fields and houses out beyond. We're forgetting, too, how pretty the woods are and only thinking of fields and houses."

Margery tried to turn the boat toward shore, and dropped her oar overboard. "Oh, dear," she cried and reached for it while Polly clutched desperately at her skirts.

"There—I've got it," she observed, straightening up and fitting the oar back into the oarlock. "But you know, Polly, to go back to the woods—I would like to get out of them, figuratively, at any rate, and be well."

"So would I," said Polly sadly, "and be happy—but some of my happiness can never come back, I know."

Margery was instantly reproachful. How stupid of her to whine over her own little bit of ill-health, and having her father away, when poor Polly had lost her home and father forever! She bit her lip, thoroughly angry at herself.

"Do you know, Polly dear," she said softly, "I like what you said about the woods ever so much. It's a very good idea. Don't you remember, too, what Dick said that day? That it wasn't enough to just go bravely through the woods—that you must gather something worth while there. I wish we could gather some treasures here."

"You're gathering strength," said Polly, trying not to let Margery see that her eyes had filled with tears.

High up in a tree-top near them there was a flash of brilliant scarlet and a whistle, sweet and clear.

"Polly," cried Margery, "what is that?"

Polly turned and looked up. "It's a cardinal—the bird they talk so much about in southern stories."

They sat gazing up at the bird, feeling something of the romance of old southern gardens, until with another flash of scarlet it flew away.

"Yes," Margery went on slowly, "I wish that we could learn something or do something worth while here in the woods."

"The first thing, I suppose," said Polly, "is to take things bravely. Don't you remember that Sunday after the day in the woods, when we cooked supper at your house? And what fun we had over the oysters. How we talked about the oyster putting a coat of pearl over troubles. We'll have to be oysters and put a coat of pearl over our troubles."

They pulled out from shore again and rowed down the lake toward the landing by the Inn. The little talk had put heart and spirits into them both, and they rowed energetically and well.

"There," cried Margery gayly, as rosy and breathless they drew up beside the little wharf, "we did that in style!" She climbed out and made the painter fast. "Do you know," she laughed as she held out a helping hand to Polly, "we'll have to be queer freaks of natural history—oysters lost in the pine woods, and finding our way out. I'm sure all the scientists ought to come and investigate us!"

They both laughed and then they parted; Polly to go home to her studying, and Margery to the Inn to write letters.

That one of her correspondents approved of the talk the two girls had was evident, for a couple of days later a box came from Dick addressed to Margery and Polly. With excited interest they opened it, suspecting some joke, and found a large oyster-shell tied up with a spray of pine, and painted with the words, "On with the good work."

CHAPTER XI

PLANS

THE young girl sitting beside Margery on the Inn porch put down her knitting and laughed self-consciously. "One of those Wilson boys that came yesterday asked me to give him this sock. He said he would wear it next his heart. Did you ever hear of anything so crazy? But they certainly are giving me a rush!"

Margery leaned her head back against her chair. "Yes," she said wearily, "they are a nuisance."

The Wilsons, two showy and rather dissipated-looking boys from New York, had tired her by their persistent attentions ever since their arrival the morning before.

The other girl bridled. "Well, of course," she said loftily, "a popular girl has boys running after her all the time."

Margery, realizing that her first speech had not pleased, politely smiled assent, and said nothing.

"I always have a lot of boys about me," continued the other girl. "My cousin says she never saw a girl have so many."

Somewhat bewildered Margery wondered why this girl, some three or four years older than herself, should be making so much ado over two rather common lads of sixteen or seventeen. She herself had found their attentions annoying and had avoided them as much as she could without rudeness.

"Yes, I always have a lot of boys about me," repeated the other girl.

Margery repressed a smile. "Of course," she thought, with amusement, "she's just blowing her own horn—that's what it means."

Pretty and always popular herself, Margery had never condescended to the constant self-advertisement with which so many young girls try to establish their attractiveness.

Now, somewhat bored by the other girl's methods, she sprang to her feet with relief as her mother came out of the house. "Oh, Mamma," she called, "where are you going?"

"Just down to the post-office, honey, to mail the letter to your father." Twice a week a long letter was sent off to Mr. Morris.

Margery slipped her arm through her mother's. "Why is it, Mamma," she said plaintively, "that so many girls boast so much about how popular they are with the boys?"

Mrs. Morris laughed. "I think that is one of the most exasperating things a young girl has to stand—that listening to a constant stream of self-adulation from other girls. It's such a bore; besides, it is embarrassing. One feels the delicacy that the girl ought to feel and plainly doesn't. But perhaps the poor souls are only whistling to keep up their courage. If you notice it is mainly done by the girls with big noses or pop-eyes."

"Do you know, you're awfully comforting to talk things over with," said Margery, giving her mother's arm another affectionate squeeze. "Even little things like being bored by silly girls' boasting. I suppose they do have to keep their courage up, though it seems a foolish way to do it. I like that favorite proverb of yours—'to understand everything is to forgive everything.'

"By the way," she added, "I haven't seen

Polly for two whole days—do you realize that?"

"Why, you went to see her yesterday!"

"Yes, but she wasn't home. And she wasn't there the day before, either. And she has seemed so mysterious lately over something. I think it's mighty mean of her!"

Mrs. Morris laughed again. "I thought somebody was talking just now about the beauties of the proverb 'to understand all is to forgive all.' Hadn't we better wait until Polly has had a chance to explain before you get vexed with her? In the meantime, just look at this, dear."

She pointed to a hole in a stunted old pine-tree, where there were four ugly, almost featherless little birdlings in a nest lined with grass.

"Aren't they ugly?" said Margery, wrinkling a fastidious nose. "What are they?"

"Bluebirds."

"Oh, Mother, those ugly things!"

"Yes, not until they fly do they develop that heavenly deep blue color." She pointed to the father bird hovering anxiously near. "Isn't he beautiful?"

"Oh, look, Mother," Margery cried, her attention caught by something that interested her more than the bluebird. "There's Polly, going toward the post-office now!

"Polly! Polly!" she called, running toward her, "wait a minute!"

Polly looked startled and tried to hide something under her coat.

"What are you up to?" demanded Margery as she caught up with her. "I haven't seen you for two whole days."

Polly laughed and blushed. "Do you promise not to tell?" she said hesitatingly. "Well—well—well—well ——"

"It ought to be dug by this time," suggested Margery.

"Well," began Polly again, "well ——"

"Try again."

"Well," floundered Polly once more, and burst out laughing.

"Go on," urged Margery.

"I can't," answered Polly with another burst of giggles.

"What's the joke?" asked Mrs. Morris, who came up to the two girls just then.

"Well," began Polly again, and both girls burst into peals of laughter.

Mrs. Morris laughed in sympathy, although she failed to see the jest.

"It's just this," explained Polly, as soon as she could. "I'm taking this to the post-office, and I couldn't get the words out somehow to explain to Margery."

"What is this?" asked Margery, eyeing a thick envelope with interest.

Polly blushed. "It's a story," she said. "I've written it, and I'm sending it off to a magazine. Wouldn't it be perfect if they were to accept it, and it would bring me in some money?"

"Of course they will take it," declared Margery loyally. "But do let me see it. I'd love to, please."

"The envelope is sealed now. But if you would like it, I'll read you one I'm writing. Can't you come back with me?"

"Yes, run along, dear," smiled Mrs. Morris.

The long envelope was mailed, and with a sigh, and a dramatic, "My fate is now in the lap of the gods," Polly linked her arm in Margery's and they set out toward Pine Cottage.

They went straight to the little room in the third story that Polly shared with her mother, and after she had opened up a big cardboard box under the bureau and extracted her story, Polly curled up cross-legged on her little cot bed and began to read it aloud.

Margery sat down on the floor with her back against the bureau and prepared herself to listen and enjoy.

It was an ambitious story, the vicissitudes of a beautiful young girl alone in Paris, and required far more knowledge of the world in general and of Paris in particular than Polly possessed. But Margery knew no more of the world or Paris than did Polly, and she was not inclined to be critical where her affections were engaged.

" Oh, Polly," she exclaimed rapturously, as Polly finally bestowed the hand of her poor but lovely heroine upon the hero, rich, magnificently handsome, and of that surpassing dash found only in the heroes of lady novelists, " it is simply perfect! It's certain to be taken! Why, I've read lots of stories in the magazines that weren't a bit better. And think of the money you can make. You'll get a hundred dollars for it, at least, and you can write at least one a week like that. Think of it! Why, you'll be back in Renwyck's Town before you know it!"

In her excitement Margery scrambled up from the floor, and walked about the little room. Her generous spirit delighted in the thought of fame and happiness coming to her friend.

"Oh, Polly," she was exclaiming loudly again, when there was the rustle of a silken skirt, a soft, rapid footfall, and "What *are* you doing?" was demanded in a high nervous voice.

The girls turned toward the door to face Miss Stanley, whose thin drawn face expressed annoyance in every line.

"Just reading," answered Polly guiltily.

"Well, please don't read so loud! I was trying to write a letter, and all the noise annoyed me so that I simply couldn't finish it."

"I'm sorry," murmured Polly, meekly. Miss Stanley turned from the door without another word, and they could hear the rustle of her skirt as she went down the stairs.

They waited in silence until the rustling ceased. “Isn’t she horrid?” remarked Polly at last, without rancor, and merely as one stating a fact. “Let’s go and finish this outside.”

The next day the story was considered as completely finished and polished and after it had been elaborately and neatly copied out in Polly’s best handwriting, both girls went to the post-office and mailed it together as a sacred rite. “I’m sure it ought to be typewritten,” said Margery, as she slipped the long envelope into the box. “I wish we had asked Mamma about it before we mailed it.”

“It’s too late now,” returned Polly. “Besides, I did think of it, but there is no place here where you can get it done. Let’s go for a row or take a walk, or do something.”

“Let’s go to that place you showed me the other day,” suggested Margery.

They turned up a narrow path, where in a thicket of flowering spicewood and low-growing oaks, beside a narrow creeping cedar-water stream there was a great fallen tree. A group of blueberry bushes tossed their fragrant clusters of flagon-shaped blossoms over the stream, and beyond in a little clearing the tall cinnamon fern displayed its developing pale green fronds.

"Isn't it pretty here?" said Margery appreciatively as the girls perched on the big log. "To think," she went on, "of all the famous people I am going to know! A great writer,—that's you, in case you don't recognize the description—and Jane a great artist, and Dick a famous architect."

"And Sam a noted admiral," laughed Polly. "Sam's so good-natured, though, he'd probably hate to hurt the feelings of the enemy by fighting with them."

"Everybody will be famous but me," Margery sighed. "I'll never amount to a row of pins at this rate. I can't even prepare for college when I'm ill all the time. Can't you see me hobbling into college, some day, a dear, nice old lady in caps and leaning on a cane? Won't I look fine playing basket-ball with spectacles and an ear-trumpet?"

"You could play tennis," giggled Polly, "and catch the ball in the ear-trumpet."

Margery's attempt at an answering smile was so woebegone that Polly hastily sought for some means to cheer her.

"Remember our talk about the woods?" she asked.

Margery picked a tiny, crimson oak-leaf, and listlessly shredded it. "Yes," she said, plainly depressed.

Polly felt discouraged. "Well," she said, trying to sound very sprightly and cheerful, "remember what we said about trying to find some treasures while we are in the woods."

"Yes," said Margery, "that's just where I feel blue—there aren't any treasures to find."

Polly felt that it was no use trying to cheer Margery up along these lines, so she tactfully began to speak of the boys and girls in her school.

"It's really pathetic about Ada," she said. "If there were just some way she could be made to understand what America means. She really is a nice girl. A whole lot nicer, really, and more worth while than that silly girl at the Inn that wants to boast about herself and her beaux all the time."

"That girl gives me softening of the brain," sighed Margery. "And that pretty Miss Williams whom they say has loads of lovers, and is always getting big boxes of flowers and candy, scarcely ever even speaks of herself! She is ever so sweet and sympathetic, and just as nice to me as if I were her age."

"I suppose that the ones that really have the attention don't have to blow their own horns so much," remarked Polly sagely. "But to go back to Ada—it does seem a shame that she is so bitter, and that she shouldn't understand a little better what America means."

"They don't any of them understand what America means," answered Margery pessimistically. "It's a shame. I wish that there was some way of teaching them. I suppose we might try to teach them a little."

"I suppose we might—but, well ——"

"Polly! I have an idea! Let's try it!"

"Let's try what?"

"Oh, Polly, don't you see! Everybody is doing something for her country these days. Look at Jane—giving all her time out of the art school to the Red Cross—of course that isn't exactly just for her country, but it is for the world. And other girls are doing it, too—lots of them. And Perry is studying aviation at college. And look at the way Papa has gone to France to help them there—everybody is doing something for somebody, except me, and I haven't done a thing for anybody. Besides if we want to gather treasures here in the woods, that would be the very best kind of treasures to gather."

Margery paused, and with her lips parted and her eyes shining sat looking thoughtfully at the cedar-water stream. Her depression had vanished.

"But Margery, I don't understand—you talk so fast and you've got everything jumbled up. What treasures are we to gather?"

"Why, don't you see, Polly?" Margery cried. "It won't be treasures for ourselves. It will be for our country, and that's the best kind. We'll try to help these people—these foreigners right here—to become better Americans. To teach them what America means. To try to make them understand things and to take away their bitterness."

Polly caught fire at once. "Oh, Margery, how wonderful! Of course I see what you mean. Do you know," solemnly, "if we can just teach those people what America means—and incidentally learn ourselves—we won't have spent our time in the woods in vain."

CHAPTER XII

THE SCHOOLHOUSE

“Do you know, Polly,” said Margery a day or two later as the two girls were rowing on the lake, “it sounds very easy to teach Ada about America, but really it’s awfully hard.”

Polly sighed. “Isn’t it?” she said. “It just shows the difference between theory and practice.”

“Yes,” laughed Margery, “I can see another difference between theory and practice—in theory you are rowing. In practice you are only sending a shower-bath over me.”

Polly dipped her oar in more carefully. “Like the Laird of Cockpen, my mind is ‘ta’en up with affairs of the state.’ I was thinking of a far more important subject than you, my child, I was thinking how we are going to make a good citizen of Ada for Uncle Sam.”

“If only she couldn’t talk so hard and fast,” Margery lamented. “She can out-talk me any day, and even when I know I am absolutely right, and could convince her if I got a chance, I can't get a word in sideways."

Ada had given a good deal of thought to the subject of her new country's shortcomings, and although her arguments were ignorant and hysterical, she had a strong pair of lungs with which to voice them. And her belief in herself and her own judgment was unflagging.

Margery thoughtfully bunched together some of the pine-needles with which she was trying to make a basket. "It seems to me," she said, "that we will have to begin on Rosa and let Ada go for a while."

"It won't do any good," Polly objected. "Rosa is absolutely under Ada's influence. They all are, for that matter."

"I suppose the practical thing is to influence Ada first and trust to her working on the others, but it's hard work."

"Margery!—has it ever occurred to you that there is something queer in the hold Ada has over the Boldini family? They seem to cringe to her so. It's uncanny! One might think that they had committed some crime, and that she had found it out."

"Oh, Polly, how awful! No, I never thought of such a thing!"

"Perhaps I just imagined it. But sometimes I have felt uneasy as though there were something queer behind it all. And as if it might bring unhappiness. Don't you know how those queer feelings come sometimes?"

"No—I don't believe I do. I can't remember ever having felt queer about anything like that—evil influences and all that sort of thing. Perhaps—oh, Polly, do you suppose Ada has hypnotized them, or anything like that?"

Both girls laughed. In the clean sweet open air, with the warm spring sunshine flooding everything, their talk of malign influences sounded absurd even in their own ears.

"I tell you what we ought to do, Poll," said Margery, holding her basket up critically to inspect it. "We ought to do something to that school. Ada talks a lot about how horrid and dreary and hideous it is, and she certainly is right there."

"But Margery, what could we do? It would have to be all repainted and papered, and dear knows what. It would cost a lot, and the school board probably wouldn't want to do it. They may not think that we are quite as important as we think ourselves ! ''

'' We could plant things around it. Then it wouldn't look so dreary from the outside. If there were lovely flowery shrubs and vines around it the effect would be very different.''

" But dear child, lovely flowering shrubs and vines happen to be very expensive—just read a florist's catalogue sometime."

" Goosie—I don't mean to go to some stylish nursery and order a whole lot of expensive shrubs. I mean to go right into the woods and dig up laurel and ferns and wild honeysuckle, and greenbrier, and transplant them. It strikes me we are different from the man in the poem, ' Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink.' It's plants, plants everywhere, and not sense enough to dig them up."

" Margery," said Polly solemnly, " you are a genius. I suppose we will have to speak to Miss Martin first."

Miss Martin was too far sunk in discouragement to feel much enthusiasm in their plans, but she said that they might speak to Mr. Beacon, the head of the school board, and ask his consent.

"Can you go to-morrow afternoon, Polly?" said Margery as Miss Martin turned to put some things in her desk. "There's nothing like getting at things and making them go!"

Polly glanced at Margery and smiled. This seemed more like the old Margery. "I believe you are getting better," she said. "All right, we'll go to-morrow. You'll have to tell us, Miss Martin, exactly how we get to this Mr. Beacon's house."

When they started out the next afternoon, Miss Martin had given them explicit directions as to the whereabouts of the little white cottage where Mr. Beacon, the village carpenter, who was as well head of the school board and elder of the little white church at the crossroads, lived in bachelor ease and independence. But Mrs. Jameson felt uneasy at their going alone.

"The path leads through the woods," she demurred, "and I don't like your going alone. I am always so afraid of your being lost in the woods,—it has haunted me ever since I came here."

But Miss Martin's directions were so simple and explicit that she finally consented to their going without her, although she escorted them half-way and stood watching them until she could see that they were safely through the woods and out on the open turnpike.

"It would be rather a grewsome experience to be lost in these woods, wouldn't it?" remarked Margery, stopping to look at a scarlet tanager perched on a twig of swamp-maple and to admire its brilliant scarlet coat and inky wings and tail.

"Don't trouble trouble until trouble troubles you," answered Polly. "What worries me is that Mrs. Stenton is coming down to visit Pine Cottage sometime before very long."

"Mrs. Stenton? Who is she?"

"Don't you remember? She is that wealthy New York woman who has a big school for girls there, and who supports Pine Cottage. It is bad enough with those five nervous ladies there to find fault with me, without Mrs. Stenton. Honestly, Margery, I feel scared to death at the thought! The only comfort is that she adopted a baby, and perhaps she'll bring the baby with her. That might relieve things a little."

"The baby will make a lot of noise," Margery comforted her. "And that will take the dear ladies' minds off of you. But honestly, Poll, do they really worry you so much? You scarcely ever talk about it."

"I try not to think about it. If I got to thinking about it, and fussing over it, why then, it would come to shut out everything else. You know how things grow when you begin to think about them."

Margery was silent. It seemed wonderful to her that Polly should be able so courageously to put the annoying and unhappy things of her life into the background and turn a brave and cheerful face to the world.

"Polly," she said slowly, "do you know what I think? I think you're a perfect wonder."

Polly pressed her arm affectionally in answer. "Now let's talk about something else," she laughed. "Our friend Mr. Beacon, for instance."

Down the quiet road stood the little white cottage they were seeking, under a huge tulip-poplar tree in bloom. As the girls drew near they could see that the dooryard enclosed in a whitewashed fence was gay with spring flowers, and that an air of shining cleanliness and amazing neatness hung about the whole place. Opposite the cottage there was a strip of woodland through which a vista had been cut to the lake beyond.

"Oh, Polly," cried Margery, leaning over the whitewashed gate and forgetting that she could be heard by anyone in the house. "Did you ever see anything so ducky? Isn't it all like a fascinating toy house? Look—even a white kitten to match it! Wouldn't Deborah be crazy about it? She says that big old farmhouse of the Morris's makes her long for a little cottage."

"Admirin' my kitten, eh?" said a voice close by. "Won't you come in and see it?" and a tall old man, whose long, clean-shaven face seemed to radiate good-nature, straightened up from the rose-bush he had been pruning.

"Are—are you Mr. Beacon, the head of the school board?" asked Polly, her hand on the gate.

"That's who I am," smiled the man. "Anything I can do for you?"

"We've come to see you about the school," put in Margery.

"Well, well. Hadn't you better come in

and sit on the porch then? Wait until I get my coat."

He took his coat off the fence where he had hung it, and led the way to the little front porch. The girls sat down on an old-fashioned settee elaborately painted on the back with great bunches of flowers, and Mr. Beacon settled himself comfortably on the steps.

"Now then," he asked, folding his hands on his knees, "what about the school?"

The girls hesitated. It was hard to know quite where to begin.

"Well," encouraged Mr. Beacon, "what can I do for you?"

"Lots of things," answered Margery frankly.

"Lots of things? Well, now perhaps I'd enjoy doing that, if I knew what they were."

"Well, it's this way," began Margery.

"You see," put in Polly.

"The school is so shabby and dreary," Margery went on.

"And Ada talks about it so."

"And we think if the school looked more attractive it might be more of a credit to America."

"And we are very anxious to teach Ada and the others what America really stands for."

Mr. Beacon raised his hands. "Hold on there, young ladies," he protested. "I'm afraid that I am not getting the drift of this. And I want to understand you, you know. Who is Ada? And what difference does she make to America?"

"Why, you see," Margery explained, "she speaks about it so bitterly."

"I think I see. Well, now, suppose you explain all about it to me first, and then the other young lady can tell me about it too. I'm not as young as I used to be and it takes a powerful lot of explaining to make me see things, sometimes."

Margery laughed. "I'm afraid our explanations were rather wild," she said. "I'll try to do better."

As clearly and definitely as she could she told about Ada and her comments on the school and America, and how she and Polly were anxious to teach her something of the meaning and beauty of their beloved country.

"And we'd just like to do what we can to make the school prettier," she finished eagerly.

"That's what we have come for to-day—to get permission to do it."

Mr. Beacon nodded thoughtfully. "Hm, hm," he said, "yes, yes. How would you do it?"

"We'd get things from the woods," Polly explained, and went on to speak of the plans she and Margery had made.

"Well," answered Mr. Beacon, rubbing his square chin, "I can't for the life of me see any objection to your doing that. There is just one stipulation I make, though. That is that you get some of these here foreigners to help you with the transplanting and the fixin' up. People always value a thing a lot more if they have worked for it. And if you want them to take an interest in things, you have to give them something to do. That's the first law."

It was so charming on the little porch with its view of the lake that the girls lingered on, although Mr. Beacon cast anxious eyes toward the bushes he was pruning. At last Margery caught his wandering glance and jumped up.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Beacon," she said. "I'm afraid that we have taken a lot of your time. When we get our transplanting done you must come to see the school."

Mr. Beacon went with them to the gate. "Well," he said, "education is a wonderful thing. I never had any. Had to work on the farm from the time I was a little chap of eight. Just got a smattering of schoolin' now and then. One day when I was about twenty, I was complainin' to a girl I knew—she was the sweetest, cutest little thing you ever saw, too; not many girls like her these days. 'Jonas,' she said, 'any fool can ask questions, but it takes a wise man to answer them. You be a fool and ask questions.'

"So that's the way I got what education I have. Learned it by being a fool and asking questions. Sometimes I asked those questions of the encyclopædia or the dictionary. Sometimes I asked them of the people who knew and could tell me. But always I asked the questions."

"I wonder," Margery said to Polly when they were safely out of ear-shot, "what became of that girl who told him to ask the questions."

"I wonder," said Polly.

CHAPTER XIII

TRANSPLANTING

"JUST flowers won't do no good," Ada sniffed contemptuously when she was told of the plan. "I think it's silly. Just to stick some green things up against a building and then call that loving your country."

"Don't you want the things you love to be beautiful? And if you love your country don't you want to make every bit of it that you can beautiful?" asked Margery in return. "Mother told me a story one day about an American who was riding in a cab in some foreign city. He tore up a letter and threw the little pieces of paper out of the cab window. The driver of the cab saw him do it, and was simply furious. He said to the man, 'What do you mean by littering up our beautiful city like that? Would you do that in your own country? Or haven't you any pride in your country?' And then he got down off the carriage and carefully picked up every one of those little pieces of paper. Now, I think that cabman was patriotic."

"Humph," said Ada.

"Well, come along with us, anyway, when we go for the plants," suggested Polly. "All the rest are going. Mrs. Morris has engaged a man and a wagon to bring the bushes to the school in, and we'll go deeper into the woods than we ever dare to when we are alone. And anyway, we're going to take sandwiches along and have a picnic and fun, so you had better come."

"Humph," said Ada again.

Nevertheless, when the others gathered at the school on Saturday morning, Ada was there, looking unusually cheerful. Rosa and the others were frankly happy, and chattered away gayly among themselves. Ada held herself aloof, and scarcely spoke to anyone until Mrs. Morris beckoned to her.

"We are going to start, now," Mrs. Morris said; "suppose you and I lead the way."

She had heard Margery and Polly speak of Ada and she was anxious to see for herself what manner of girl she was.

"I'm afraid it is a little late to be transplanting things," she began. "But still I have seen some marvellous things done in that way. Anyway, I believe in trying things, don't you? Especially when it isn't going to do a bit of harm if you fail."

"I think failure is the worst thing in the world," answered Ada solemnly.

"And yet failure can be very wholesome and bracing, if we have the courage and fortitude to rise from it and try again."

"I don't agree with you," Ada said flatly.

"No?" said Mrs. Morris, checking a desire to laugh.

"No. People talk a lot about courage and making the best of things. Things ought to be so perfect that you never have to make the best of them."

"We can only take the world as we find it," observed Mrs. Morris mildly.

"Oh, yes, that's easy for you rich," and Ada launched out into one of her bitter speeches.

Mrs. Morris was silent. She was studying this strange girl with her queer mixture of ignorance and distorted knowledge culled from revolutionary books, and thinking what a force for good or evil she might develop into.

"And I suppose there are thousands more like her," she reflected. "We Americans must try to make friends with them, perhaps, and teach them something to take the place of their bitter thoughts."

At last Ada stopped talking, tired from the force of her own eloquence, for she spoke very intensely.

"I suppose you are looking at those two girls over there," said Mrs. Morris frankly, waving her hand toward Margery and Polly who were happily absorbed in digging up a wild azalea, "and making contrasts. And yet each of those girls has her trouble. Polly's is a real and dreadful grief. Just a few months ago her dear father died, and her home was broken up. You have your father and mother and your home. And Margery has been very ill, and will be frail for a long time. How she envies you your strength, and your power to study. And her father has gone across to France to help the wounded there and we cannot help but feel very anxious. We would not have him do otherwise, of course, but still I never have a moment that is free from anxiety. I try to keep my mind off it, and to think of the girls' idea about the oyster. Did they tell you?"

"No," said Ada, curtly.

Mrs. Morris laughed and told of the oyster-shell Dick had sent to Margery to keep up her courage. "Do you know," she finished, "some of the great people of the world have been pearl makers. Because of some unhappiness in their lives they have reached out and done some wonderful thing, written great books, or music, or done something for humanity. I have a long string of pearl beads.—I believe that I will give a bead to every girl who can bring me the name of someone who has done some big thing in spite of the obstacles of ill-health, or lack of means, or some crushing sorrow. To the girl who can get the longest string of beads, I'll give any books she may want."

Ada smiled and her plain face was transfigured. "I would like a book," she said.

"Mother," called Margery, "just come and see what wonderful laurel bushes we have found. They are not very big, but they will transplant better, Cæsari says, than bigger ones," and she included the eldest of the Boldini family, who spade in hand was standing beside her.

Cæsari grinned, and, delighted to be noticed, began with a tremendous display of energy and enthusiasm to spade up another laurel bush.

"Who is that boy, Margery?" asked her mother, indicating another lad who stood by sombrely watching Cæsari.

"Why, I really don't know. His name is Angelo Bucci and his father has the little cobbler's shop over beyond the road to Georgeville. That's all I know about him. Ask Polly."

"Oh, there are a whole lot of them, that's all I know," answered Polly.

"He has such a queer, worried look, I wondered about him."

"Oh, Polly," laughed Margery, "aren't they the ones you told me were under Ada's spell? That she had some sort of an evil influence over them?"

Polly laughed, too. "That does sound like a dime novel, doesn't it? Still I have thought sometimes that there might be something queer."

"Ugh," shivered Margery in assumed dread, "let's forget spells and such witchcraft in this heavenly spot. Don't you wish, Mother, that we could camp out here, and not have to go back to the Inn?"

They were in a little clearing beside a narrow winding stream, where the spring flowers were blooming. In a damp sheltered corner Margery suddenly spied something pink.

"Look," she cried, running back to the others with a lovely lavender-pink flower in her hand. "What is this?"

"That's a whippoorwill's shoe, or moccasin flower," Polly explained. "Show it to Ada, just for fun, and see what she says."

Ada was contemptuous of the flower, although Margery suspected that her contempt might be partly assumed for effect. But she detained Margery and Polly. "That lady says that she'll give us a prize for finding out the most people who have done big things in spite of trouble or sorrow. That's all right for you rich, but where will I get the books?"

Polly hesitated. To give her precious books to Ada would be a sacrifice; Ada was untidy and careless, and the books would never be the same after she had handled them. Still, she had made up her mind to try to show Ada another side of America and Americans than she professed to know.

"You can have my books," she said. "I'll be glad to lend them to you."

Ada looked at her in surprise, but made no comment.

"Come, everybody," called Mrs. Morris; "we must get to work if we are going to fill the cart before the twilight sets in."

"All right," the girls declared, "we really will get to work."

Margery took charge of one group, and Polly another, while Mrs. Morris directed the little children to dig up the low-growing wild flowers with which a flower-bed was to be planted beside the schoolhouse. Most of the older boys knew something about gardening and they were able to select the plants and dig them up with good judgment. They took laurel and holly and the pink-blossomed wild azalea and the clambering greenbrier, although Polly protested at that and declared it would be "All over everything," before they had been able to make any more improvements on the schoolhouse.

"Some time some nice public-spirited person will think of giving us some money to paint the school and fix things up, but when he comes to see the place and look it over, he won't find any school, all he will see will be a huge greenbrier vine with a smokestack sticking out of the center of it."

Margery was interested in her mother's scheme of a flower garden and suggested the lupin, brilliantly blue, and the white-blossomed turkey-beard to plant in the bare corners where nothing else was likely to grow with any degree of success.

"Do you suppose that they are enjoying it?" she asked her mother. "And that they will take any interest in the things after we get them planted? Or do you think that they will just break the plants and not care for them a bit?"

"Well, they seem to be enjoying it now, judging from the way they are laughing and chattering—just look at that girl now." And she nodded toward Rosa Bonini who seemed in fits of laughter over some joke she was sharing with another girl of about her own age. "And I think that they will enjoy the sandwiches and cake I have, when they get back to the school."

"Don't you think, Mrs. Morris," asked Polly, "that we ought to be getting back to plant these things pretty soon?"

"Yes, Polly, I do—we'll just go on to that open space over there and get some of those ferns and then we will go back. Margery, you look tired, child; you would better climb up on the cart and ride the rest of the way."

Margery was tired enough to enjoy the ride back to the school perched up beside the old Irishman who drove the cart. From her place she could look down on the others and see all that was going on.

"Just think," she observed to the driver, "of there being so many nationalities in one tiny little school. There are Russians and Italians, and the little son of the English maid at the Inn, and the German cook's daughter, and—and those little ones there are just plain Americans."

"Loike meself as ye can tell by me accint."

Margery laughed and jumped down from the cart as it stopped before the schoolhouse.

Although the old Irishman gave willing and efficient help in planting the vines and bushes, and the boys and girls labored cheerfully, it was longer and harder work than Margery or Polly had dreamed of its being.

" Who would have thought," remarked Margery to Miss Martin, who had just come to the schoolhouse to see what had been brought from the woods, " that it would be such hard work just to dig holes and stick things in them. Thank goodness, they are through now and that we've got plenty of lemonade and sandwiches and candy, or those boys and girls would never forgive us for the work we have made them do. And the school does look better already, doesn't it? "

" Yes, it does," admitted Miss Martin. " I didn't think it would, either."

On each side of the door was a clump of holly and laurel bushes, and laurel and holly and low-growing azaleas were massed about the sides wherever their future growth would not interfere with the outlook from the windows.

" When the flowers and ferns grow it's going to be simply stunning. Now for the sandwiches."

"What is that child crying for?" asked Mrs. Morris, coming up to them with a box of candy in her hands. "I've tried to comfort her, but it doesn't do the slightest good. I just seem to frighten her."

"What child?" asked Margery.

Mrs. Morris pointed across the road to a log under an old juniper tree there. On the log there was a forlorn little heap of clothes that moved occasionally.

"I suppose that some of the other children have hit her, or hurt her, or taken her candy away," said Polly. "Children can be so awfully cruel to each other. I'll go and see what's the matter."

She crossed the road and the others followed, keeping a respectful distance in order not to frighten the child.

"I think it's one of the Bucci family," Miss Martin said in a low voice.

Polly bent over the child. "What's the matter, little girl?" she asked kindly.

The girl raised half-drowned brown eyes. "It's da poppa," she sobbed.

"Has he whipped you?" Polly asked. She had already found out that her schoolmates were often very severely whipped by their fathers.

"No. No. He's gone."

Polly sat down on the log beside the child. "Tell me about it," she said gently. "When did he go?"

"He went last month," said a voice at her elbow, and she turned to find Angelo Bucci, the boy whose sullen worried expression had attracted Mrs. Morris's attention earlier in the afternoon.

The little girl bowed her head on her knees again and there was a fresh burst of tears.

"Can't you make her stop?" Polly implored.

Angelo spoke rapidly in Italian to his little sister and the child bravely tried to choke down her tears.

"Where has your father gone?" asked Polly.

The boy scowled and said nothing.

The little girl raised her head again. "He's gone—we don't know where. We ain't got no money."

"Why did he go?"

Angelo scowled again. “He ain’t got no money to pay the rent.”

Bit by bit Polly extracted enough of their story to draw her own conclusions. The cobbler had fallen behind with his rent, and at the threat of expulsion by a grasping landlord, had disappeared, in the trust that neighbors, kind as the poor usually are to each other, would take care of his family.

“But people won’t do nothing for us no more,” the boy had said, “and we can’t get nothing from the store any more because we ain’t got no money. I can’t work da show-shop. I can’t fix da shoes. My mother, she’s sick. I can’t make no money working because I have to go to school. Dat’s da law.”

“That is bad,” Polly said sympathetically. She patted the little girl on the shoulder. “There, there, kiddie, don’t cry any longer. I’ll speak to Mrs. Morris and she’ll do something for you. I know she will. And your father will come back. Perhaps he hasn’t gone very far away.”

Margery and her mother crossed the road and joined them. “What’s the matter?” Mrs. Morris said softly to Polly.

"I'll explain later," Polly whispered back. "Are there plenty of sandwiches left?"

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Morris answered with her quick tact. "But I'm afraid you two won't get your share unless you hurry," she added to the boy and girl.

The Bucci brother and sister moved off quickly in the direction of the lunch-basket, and Polly explained in a few words what little she had been able to find out.

"I have heard of men leaving their families before when the wolf was at the door," Mrs. Morris said thoughtfully. "People will almost always take care of a woman and her children. We must investigate this case. They may really be in need."

Margery looked at Polly with widening eyes. "Polly," she said, "do you suppose that man ran away because he hadn't any money to pay the rent, or because Ada has scared him into doing it?"

CHAPTER XIV

PEARLS

"We must go to see the Bucci family tomorrow," Mrs. Morris had declared the evening after they had been plant-hunting. "They may be in actual want."

"But, Mother, how can we do it? We can't just walk in and say, 'Here we are. We know your husband has skedaddled, Mrs. Bucci, so we've come to play Santa Claus.'"

Mrs. Morris held up a pair of patent leather pumps she had just taken from the cupboard. "There are more tactful ways of doing it," she smiled. "For instance—don't you think that these heels might be a little bit straighter? At any rate, we will take them to the cobbler's, and while we are there we may hear something about her needs from the wife of the absent cobbler. And I really don't think that it is right to let such a case go by unnoticed. For one never knows what people may be suffering."

"The children certainly did look unhappy. That poor little girl's heart seemed broken," Margery observed as she turned out the light and opened her window. "Goodness, just hear that wind. Doesn't it sound mournful?"

In the middle of the night she was awakened by the wind howling around the corner of the house and rattling at the windows as though it were going to break them.

"Why, it's pouring," she thought as she cuddled down deeper under the warm covers. "And hear that wind. Oh, dear!" as a fierce gust of wind seemed to fill the room and there was a crash. A vase of wild flowers on a table had been blown over.

When she awoke the next morning the room felt damp and cold. As she put down the window she saw that the lake was gray and storm-tossed and that the encircling tall dark pines were half shut out by the mist and rain.

"I'm afraid that we won't be able to go to the Bucci family to-day," she called to her mother. "Isn't it a dreary day? What ever will we do with ourselves?"

" One girl of average intelligence not to be able to provide amusement for herself without outside assistance! And only for one day! For shame, Margery."

Margery chuckled. " To be bored is almost the worst sin in your calendar, isn't it, Mother? "

" To have time hang heavily on one's hands is. It seems to me perfectly dreadful not to have any resources."

" These people don't look as though they had many resources, do they? " Margery remarked at breakfast, as she poured the cream on her oatmeal.

Mrs. Morris glanced about the dining-room. The rain was coming down now in sheets and the room was so dark that the electric lights had to be turned on.

" It's too bad when people have only a few days' outing that they should have such weather," she said sympathetically. " With us it is different. We can afford to be cheerful. Now what are you going to do? Write letters? "

" I suppose so. I have a lot to write."

"And might I suggest it?—there is some of

Margery's mending that Margery might do."

The rain continued to beat down and the wind swept through the trees, but inside the two big corner rooms that Margery and her mother occupied it was warm and cosy.

"By the way, Mother, Ada said that you were going to offer a prize to the girl who could find the most people who have done big things in spite of sorrow or illness or poverty."

"The most people who have been masters of their fate? Yes. I thought it might offset some of Ada's bitterness if she were to discover how happily she is placed in comparison to some of the people who fought through difficulties and became great and famous. The trouble is that she thinks everybody else lies on a bed of ease.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea for you and Polly to try for that prize either. Seeing what other people have done in the world is very inspirational. But my idea of the prize grew out of your talk about the oysters and the pearls."

"I see. You want the people who, as oysters, have coated their troubles with mother of pearl. I'd have to read up a lot. I think when I write to Grandpapa I'll ask him to send me some books about famous people."

Later in the day the storm slackened. The wind died down and the rain subsided into a gentle patter. Margery persuaded her mother into allowing her to go to the post-office to mail her letters, and Mrs. Morris, concluding that perhaps the walk would do her good, suggested that she stop in to see Polly for a few minutes. Guarded from the dampness by raincoat, overshoes and umbrella, Margery set out.

Everywhere she saw signs of the havoc wrought by last night's storm. Great branches of the trees were broken off and lay on the ground, the rowboats by the Inn wharf were half swamped, and here and there a shutter on one of the cottages hung forlornly by one hinge. But the air was fresh and rain-washed and Margery enjoyed trudging along the sandy road under the dripping pines.

" How good it smells," she thought. " There's nothing like getting out-of-doors after a storm."

As she knocked at the door of Pine Cottage she could hear unusual sounds of activity.

"Miss Stanley must be away," she thought with amusement. "She never would allow that rumpus."

The maid opened the door, and as Margery stepped into the hall and put her dripping umbrella into the stand, she heard Miss Stanley, her voice almost gay, speaking in the little room at the back of the house, and Polly answering her.

"Polly," she called softly, so as not to irritate Miss Stanley. "Who-oo."

"Oh, hello, Margery," Polly called delightedly. "Come back here."

Margery hurried down the hall and found Polly putting up some curtains in front of a little bookcase improvised from a packing box. Miss Stanley, on her knees before a pile of books, threw her a nod and smile over her shoulder.

"Why, she's pretty," Margery thought with surprise.

"Look, Margery," Polly exclaimed. "See what Miss Stanley has helped me to make. She has lent some books, too. We are going to have a little lending library. Ada spoke to me about books to-day. I think that they are the one way to Ada's heart. She is starved for something to read here. And she was thrilled over your mother's idea of finding out the people that are conquerors of their fate, captains of their souls, and so forth. I told Miss Stanley about it all, and she has lent all these books."

"Oh, goody," Margery cried. "I wrote to Grandpapa and asked him to send me some books, too. If he does I'll put them in the collection. If books will tame Ada, let's give her lots to read."

Miss Stanley got up from her knees. "I think that it is such a good plan that you have of helping these people and I'm sure books will help you."

She left the room to get some more books, and Margery whispered to Polly:

"What *has* struck her?"

"I don't know," Polly whispered back. "She heard me telling Mother that Ada had asked for books, and she seemed interested, so I told her all about everything. Really, she's been awfully nice. Perhaps she's feeling better and less nervous."

"Perhaps the idea of the oyster and the

pearl rather cheered her up the way it did us," said Margery sagely. "She may just be ill and discouraged, and not really disagreeable, after all."

"Perhaps. And perhaps she ——" Polly stopped abruptly, for Miss Stanley had come back with some more books in her hands and looking even more cheerful.

"I had a letter from one of the Renwyck's Town boys the other day," Margery addressed Miss Stanley, "and he said somebody carved the motto once on the head of a pickaxe, 'Either I'll find a way or make it.' I think that's a pretty good motto, don't you? Either we'll find a way to tame Ada or we'll make one."

Miss Stanley sighed sadly. "That's a motto that belongs to youth's cheerfulness. When you get older, you don't feel so sure. However, I try to remember the legend my mother used to tell me about the birds. When the birds were first created they had no wings. Then their wings came and they found them very burdensome. They chirpingly begged and begged to be relieved of their wings because they were too heavy. But the burden was not taken away and they were told that they must learn to lift it. Gradually they did learn to lift the burden of their wings, and so they gained their power to fly. But when one is ill and tired it is hard to remember that story. There's someone at the door."

"Ada, probably," Polly explained. "She said she would be here about this time for the books."

It was Ada, wind-blown and tired, her shoes sopping wet, and her over-stylish hat a wreck, for she had neither overshoes nor umbrella, but she was eager for the books, and with little more than a nod to the others she sat down in front of the bookcase.

Margery sat down on the floor before the pile Miss Stanley had lent. "What a lot of good books you have, Miss Stanley," she said admiringly.

"Yes, my books have been a great deal to me. I had nowhere else to put them, as I don't like to put books in storage, so I brought them here. These I had to lend to my classes when I was teaching."

Most of the books were literary criticisms and biographies, and Margery, looking through them with the idea of the pearl and the oyster, found much to interest her.

"Miss Stanley," she asked, "did you know about Lucy Larcom?"

"Who's Lucy Larcom?" interrupted Ada, rudely.

"She was a New England poetess who wrote beautiful poems on nature," Miss Stanley explained. "She was a factory girl in the days before there were laws against too long hours in factories. Every day she worked from five in the morning until seven in the evening, and scarcely ever had a day off except Sunday, and yet her poems are lovely and with the very spirit of out-of-doors in them."

"I like old Beethoven plugging away at his music," observed Polly, "and all the time as deaf as an adder and never able to hear any of it. That was certainly working in spite of obstacles, wasn't it?"

"I like Stevenson," said Margery. "He was so ill and so cheerful always. And just think what he did in spite of bad health."

"Yes," answered Miss Stanley thoughtfully; "yes, we mustn't forget Stevenson. I think perhaps one of the bravest people of all was Prescott. When he was a handsome, merry boy at college another boy accidentally struck him in the eye with a hard piece of bread. They were skylarking, I suppose. It immediately destroyed the sight of his left eye, and the other eye became very badly affected, so that he was almost entirely blind. Yet he made up his mind to devote himself to historical writings, and in spite of his infirmity, managed with the help of a secretary to study all the histories and ancient and modern languages that he needed in his work."

"What did he write?" asked Ada.

"Oh, Ferdinand and Isabella, and the Conquest of Mexico, and the Conquest of Peru. They are books you ought to read."

"Dear me," said Polly, "I don't see how you and I are ever going to be famous, Margery, unless we drop off an arm or two, the way the pine-tree swift does its tail. To be armless, or legless, or deaf, or blind, seems to be the first qualification for success."

Ada looked up and chuckled. The first time that either Margery or Polly had ever heard her laugh without sarcasm or bitterness. "There was a famous man, I forget his name," she said, " and his grandfather sat on him when he was a baby. He was so nearly smothered that he was feeble for most of his life. You might get somebody to sit on you."

The girls laughed rather hilariously; not so much because they thought Ada's speech funny as because they desired to encourage her in any attempt in amiability that she might make.

Miss Stanley went off to take her nap and the girls settled down on the floor, cross-legged like three solemn little Buddhas, to read. Now and then Margery and Polly glanced at each other and smiled to see Ada bending over her book, her bitter little face strangely softened and absorbed.

" Why, how dark it is," said Polly at last. " I must light the lamp."

" I must go in just a moment," Margery murmured; " but this is so interesting."

Ada looked at her and the bitter expression stole over her face again. Never perhaps had Margery looked prettier or more high-bred than she did at that moment as she crouched on the floor, her straight little serge frock falling in soft folds about her and the light of the lamp Polly had just lit streaming down on her golden curls and flushed, absorbed face. Her very appearance stood for everything that Ada hated and rebelled against, and the foreign girl's dark eyes seemed to blaze as she gazed at her. Polly caught the look and was startled.

Margery was unconscious. With a laugh she handed the book over to Ada and got up. "Just read that about Lincoln," she said. "It makes one feel so mean and small. Read it aloud."

Obediently Ada read: "'On one occasion someone told Mr. Lincoln that Stanton had called him a fool. "Did Stanton say that?" Mr. Lincoln asked. "Yes, Mr. Lincoln, he did." "Then I must be one, for Stanton is nearly always right, you know."'"

"Wasn't that wonderful and forgiving?" said Margery. "Most people would have been so hopping mad that they would have ripped out some mean thing about Stanton. I know I should." She picked up her raincoat. "It is dark," she exclaimed. "I must hurry or Mother will worry."

Ada looked up at her again, caught by something in Margery's unconscious courtesy and sincerity, and the bitter look faded out of her eyes.

" It's too late for you to be out alone," she said protectingly. " I'll go with you and take care of you."

CHAPTER XV

THE BUCCI FAMILY

"I WONDER how the things we planted around the schoolhouse survived the storm—poor things," said Margery to her mother the next morning. "It's hard to realize that yesterday was so dreadfully stormy."

She and her mother were sitting together on the Inn veranda, enjoying the warm sunshine and the fresh sweet air. The day was brilliantly clear, every tiny twig and blade of grass was rain-washed and sparkling, and the sky was a cloudless blue. Only the fallen branches and the occasional puddles in the sandy road remained to speak of the storm.

"What's that dinner bell ringing for?" asked Margery suddenly. "Hear it?"

There was a monotonous ding-dong of a hand-bell from far down the road. They listened. Nearer and nearer grew the sound.

"Oh," said Mrs. Morris, "it's a travelling scissors grinder. Wait and see."

A little old man with a small grindstone strapped to his back came in sight. He carried a bell in his hand which he rang with the same melancholy monotony that he cried, "Any scissors to grind? Any knives to grind?"

"Spring is really here," remarked Mrs. Morris. "The travelling scissors grinder seems just as much part of spring as the bluebird."

"Yes," sighed Margery dolefully, "spring's here. And I'm here—instead of being at home in Renwyck's Town studying for dear life for college. It's awfully discouraging. And it seems so lonely never to see any of the boys and girls."

"There's Polly," Mrs. Morris reminded her.

"Yes, of course, there's Polly, and she's a perfect lamb. But I think that she gets lonely and homesick, too."

"It seems very ungrateful when we think how safe and well we are here—with warm rooms and good food and every comfort, and compare it with what the people on the other side of the ocean are suffering," and Mrs.

Morris held up the letter that had come that morning from her husband.

"Yes," said Margery contritely, "it does seem wicked for me to grumble." She put out her hand for her father's letter, and opening it read it once more, while her mother sat absently gazing into space. Suddenly Mrs. Morris smiled and nodded her head as though a thought had come to her that was pleasing, but Margery read on, deeply absorbed in the letter.

"This afternoon, Margery, I think that we had better go to see that Bucci family," observed Mrs. Morris as Margery folded up the letter and put it back into the envelope. "We can stop for Polly after school, as she wants to go with us, and then we can see, too, how our plants weathered the storm."

The storm had done remarkably little damage, as they found out when they stopped at the school that afternoon. Some of the frailer wild flowers had been washed away, but the bushes all stood staunch and erect. Some of the vines were down but one of the boys was busily tying up those that had fallen.

"Who is that boy?" asked Margery as

Polly joined them and they walked away from the schoolhouse.

"One of the Bucci boys. The oldest one. Do you know, Margery, I haven't heard a word about my stories yet. I think that is a very good sign, don't you?"

"Yes, indeed," Margery assured her. "Oh, Polly, I can scarcely wait to see how much money they send you!"

"You scrub floors! You scrub floors!" shrieked a chorus back of them. "You scrub floors!"

They turned; the Bucci boy was running down the road pursued by four or five children who ran after him screaming, "You scrub floors!"

"Why shouldn't he scrub floors?" asked Mrs. Morris of one of the children as they came up. "Don't you have your floors scrubbed?"

"Me mother scrubs our floors," answered the child. "Scrubbin's woman's work. Men and boys don't scrub floors. You scrub floors!" she screamed again at the boy.

"Me mother's sick," muttered the Bucci boy sullenly. "I gotta do it."

He ran on, the other children still after him.

"Horrid little things," remarked Polly indignantly. "Children can be so awfully cruel."

"What queer standards there are," remarked Mrs. Morris. "Just because that poor boy in trying to help his mother breaks one of the little conventions those children hold, they must all taunt him."

Polly linked her arm in Margery's and drew her back. "Margie," she whispered, "what's up?"

"What's up?"

"Yes, something is up?"

"How is something up? I don't know what you mean."

"Why, when your mother went to the post-office this morning she stopped in to see Mother. She was leaving just as I came home for luncheon. Mother wouldn't tell me what they were talking about, but I know it was something important."

"I don't know a thing about it. I just imagine Mother was calling on your mother for the pleasure of it. She's awfully fond of her, you know."

"No, there is something up. If it's anything wrong I'd rather know it right away and get it over. If there is something wrong you'll tell me, won't you? We have had so much trouble that it makes me nervous, and I do feel worried about Mother. She doesn't seem a bit strong."

Margery pressed her hand sympathetically. "There isn't a blessed thing wrong that I know of," she assured her. "And Mother came in from her walk looking awfully cheerful. She wouldn't have done that, you know, if anything was wrong. You poor dear, you've just had so much that it's made you jumpy. I'll ask Mother later on about it. In the meantime, cheer up and try to forget it."

"What are you two girls whispering about?" asked Mrs. Morris with a laugh. "Or is it a secret that I'm not supposed to know? Isn't that the house of the Buccis' there ahead of us? I saw the boy go in there."

She waved her hand in the direction of a tiny whitewashed cottage that stood under a huge buttonwood tree. Next to it was a blacksmith's shop and beyond that several small houses were clustered together.

"Shoes for man and beast," said Margery, indicating the cobbler's and the smithy. "Now, Mother, how are you going to proceed? Your humble audience is along, you know."

"I'm going to leave my humble audience outside. Now that I have you fairly well I'm not going to run any risk of your getting some new germ. Besides, I want to speak freely to Mrs. Bucci without two giggling girls around."

"Oh, Mother, we won't giggle. Graven images will be simply hilarious compared with us. Really."

But Mrs. Morris was obdurate and it ended in Margery and Polly sitting on the steps of the shop while Mrs. Morris went inside.

From where they sat they could see into the blacksmith shop, where a horse was being shod. "Isn't it interesting?" remarked Margery as the shoe was finally fitted on and the horse led out and backed into a light rickety wagon. "Do you know, I never saw a horse shod before. Gracious, do you hear that crying in there?"

"Yes, someone has been crying in there for some time. I suppose it's Mrs. Bucci."

"I'm going in," Margery announced. "I don't like Mother being in there alone without me to take care of her."

"I'll go with you," Polly declared, and looking very valiant, the two girls marched into the cobbler's.

There they were confronted by a weeping woman with her head buried in her apron, and a couple of wide-eyed children clinging to her skirts. Angelo, the eldest Bucci boy, looking a little less sullen than usual, leaned against the counter, while Mrs. Morris tried to talk to him.

"Yes, my pop he's gone," he kept repeating. "He won't come back till he gets money."

"But don't you know where he has gone?" Mrs. Morris questioned again.

"He's gone."

The weeping woman lowered her apron. "I told you," she insisted. "I told you he's gone. It's da curse. He was wicked and I tell him so. Then he could make no money to pay da rent—or to buy da food. It's da curse. Den he go away. An' I cannot mend da shoes. An' we have no money."

"What curse?" asked Mrs. Morris gently.

Angelo turned to her. "Da curse," he answered digging the toe of his boot into a crack of the floor. "When you wicked then you get cursed."

Mrs. Morris was bewildered. "I don't think that I understand," she murmured. Then with a smile she held out her hand to the black-eyed little girl hiding back of her mother's skirts. Shyly the child came to her, and Mrs. Morris slipped a folded bill into the little hand.

"You must have food for the children now," she said kindly to the woman. "And you must let me help you for the present. Then we must see what we can do about getting your husband back. Come, girls, we must be going now."

"Well, Mother, what was it?" Margery demanded as soon as they were out of ear-shot. "You didn't let us hear much of it, did you?"

Mrs. Morris tucked back a lock of Margery's hair that straggled down over her cheek. "There really isn't much to tell, honey. You heard as much as I did. It's all rather mysterious. When I went in I asked if

I could have my shoes mended—as a way of breaking the ice. The woman burst into tears at once, and told me that her husband had gone away and left her, and that she had no money. Whether she really knows where her husband is and is merely pretending so as to arouse sympathy, I can't tell."

"But what about the curse, Mrs. Morris?" Mrs. Bucci's speech about the curse had appealed to Polly's love of the romantic.

"Yes, Mother, what about the curse?"

"I couldn't understand that at all. There was such a mixture of broken English and Italian and sobs that I could make very little out of it."

"She seemed to think that he had been wicked, and she told him so. Perhaps she told him so too much," said Polly shrewdly, "and he ran away for the sake of peace."

Mrs. Morris laughed. "Yes, it may be a case of a scolding wife. Anyway, I have given her some money, enough to tide them over for a few days, and I will watch them—also I will ask some of the people here."

"I like the idea of the curse," declared Margery. "I'm sure it's a case of witchcraft and that Ada has bewitched them. There's an idea for a story for you, Polly."

"Yes," said Polly. "Of course it's a curse, and that the goblins have kotched Mr. Bucci and dragged him away."

"Perhaps the poor man has been taken ill somewheres," suggested Mrs. Morris. "Anyway, we will do what we can for them."

A downy black and white woodpecker flitted about in a tree near them and the girls lost interest in the Bucci family in watching the pretty bird.

"What's the legend about the woodpecker that Dick told us one time, do you remember, Polly?" asked Mrs. Morris. "It was something about the bird's red topknot, I know."

Polly was thoughtful for a moment. "Oh, yes," she said, "I do remember the story. Once a beggar stopped at the door of a cottage and asked for something to eat. The owner of the cottage was baking griddle cakes, and although she was very, very stingy, she didn't quite like to refuse him. So she did as little as she could; she just broke off a tiny piece of dough, flattened it out and put it on the griddle. And at once the dough began to spread and spread until it was over the whole griddle. ‘That’s too big to give away,’ said the woman, and took a still smaller piece of dough. That spread too, until it made a big cake. So she took an even smaller piece of dough, and that too grew big. At last she got down to a pinch of dough no bigger than a pinhead, and that at once went all over the griddle and all over the top of the stove. ‘All my cakes are too big to give away,’ she said to the beggar and slammed the door, her face as red with anger as the scarlet cap on her head. Now it happened that the beggar was an angel and when he saw how mean and stingy she was, he changed her into a woodpecker but forgot to change her cap. The woodpecker flew right up the chimney, and got his wings all black with soot. So that is why the woodpecker has a red cap and black wings, and has to find its food by boring into the trees.”

“It is lucky that it has gone out of fashion for angels to go about the countryside changing people into birds,” laughed Mrs. Morris. “For so much of our giving is so like that woman's that I'm afraid we would all be hopping about the trees pecking at the branches for our food."

"You wouldn't, Mother," said Margery loyally. "But you might find it lonely all by yourself."

Polly walked back to the Inn with Margery and her mother, then she made her way to the post-office. Ever since she had sent off her stories she had not been able to approach that little building without a lump in her throat and a catch at her breath. There was always the thought that lying in the post-box might be that wonderful letter which was to come with the check which was to be a forerunner of happier times. It would mean such a difference to the lives of her mother and herself that it did not seem possible that any editor could be so cruel as not to accept her stories.

"It's so silly," she said angrily to herself this evening as she pushed open the post-office door, "to be so scared. Any mail for me, Mr. Burton?" aloud. "Oh!"

"What's the matter?" asked the postmaster kindly. "Bad news?"

"Yes. No! No! Yes."

She tore open the envelopes. Perhaps the stories had been sent back because they needed a little alteration. Perhaps . . . .

But, alas, there were only the rejection slips, cold and formal. Her little house of dreams in ruins, she closed the post-office door after her and turned toward the path in the woods that led to Pine Cottage.

The tears would come. " Stop it, stop it," she scolded herself. " Other people have disappointments too. Jane was disappointed, last summer, but she has gone on with her work after all."

But though her brain pointed out that the return of her stories was only to be expected, and that such things happened every day, her heart persisted in aching, and when she reached the log by the little stream, she dropped down on it and buried her head in her arms.

There was a rustling through the dead leaves left from last autumn and someone plumped down on the log beside her. Startled, Polly looked up.

" Oh, it's you, Ada? "

" Yes, it's me. Say, I've found another oyster. A dandy one."

Polly's hand stole to her cheek and she tried unobserved to brush away the tear that was meandering down toward her chin.

"Who?" she asked with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

"Henry Fawcett. I saw something about him in one of the books I got at your house. But it didn't say awful much. So I asked Miss Martin. She didn't know much, either, but she looked him up in a book she has. He was blind. When he was a young man he was out shooting with his father. A lot of partridges went up and his father shot at them. Most of the shot hit the bird Mr. Fawcett was aiming at, but two of the shot went aside and hit Henry Fawcett square in the eyes. So he was blinded for life."

"What was his pearl?" asked Polly, not feeling any interest, but hoping to keep Ada's attention from her tear-stained cheeks.

"He was a political leader. First he was a professor at some college, even though he was blind, and then he was a member of Parliament, and then he became postmaster-general. And he made a wonderful one. Say, you've been crying!"

Polly moved impatiently. "Oh, dear," she thought, "Ada will pry into everything now. And she'll never understand."

"It's no use letting on you haven't been crying," announced Ada. "Anybody with half an eye can see that you have."

In spite of herself, Polly smiled—a somewhat weak and watery smile. "Yes, I—I have been c-crying," she admitted.

"What for?"

"I felt blue over something."

"What have you got to feel blue over? Rich people like you don't have real things to make them sad."

"Don't they?" responded Polly dryly.

"That Margery's been mean and stuck up to you, I guess."

"'That Margery' is never mean and stuck up to anybody! She's a perfect dandy. The trouble is, since you must know it, that I wrote a couple of stories and mailed them to a magazine. I was awfully anxious that they should be taken. You see, I need the money. My father died very suddenly this last winter and we have scarcely anything to live on. Mother has to work very hard running Pine Cottage, and she isn't strong. I do so want to make some money and help out."

"Why don't the Morrises give you money?"

Polly flushed. "Why, don't you see?" she explained, "we wouldn't want to accept it. Margery's grandfather did offer to educate me, but I thought I ought to come here with Mother."

Ada made no comment. "Let's see your stories," she said, holding out her hand for the envelopes. "I'd like to read them."

Polly gave them to her, and took up again her depressing thoughts while Ada strained her eyes in the gathering dusk over the closely written pages.

A song-sparrow chirped in the bushes in front of them as it flitted from twig to twig, and Polly watched it idly. "'How can ye chant, ye little birds, and I sae weary, fu' of care?'" she quoted to herself sadly and felt cheered by her own melancholy.

Ada read the stories through without saying anything and folded them back in their envelopes.

"They're not very good," she remarked as she put them down on the log beside her.

Polly managed to achieve a smile. "No," she said, "that's evident."

"You don't know enough about the way people feel to put it down on paper. You make this girl starving in a big city," and Ada tapped one of the envelopes with her forefinger. "What do you know about how people feel when they are alone and starving? You don't know anything about it. Why, I could tell you things! Things that have happened to people I know. Why, my father once—but what's the use of telling you about it? You wouldn't understand even."

Polly was silent.

"Yes, you wouldn't understand. But why don't you write things about the flowers and birds and squirrels and things that you're always making such a fuss over?"

"Yes," answered Polly vaguely.

"Why don't you?" prodded Ada.

"I don't know. I don't believe that anybody would want to read them."

"I wouldn't," Ada stated frankly. "I don't care anything about such things. But some people do, I suppose. I wouldn't give up anyway and just sit around and cry about it. It may be the blessing in disguise that all the goody-goods are always talking about. You'll never make a success writing about people, but you might make a hit writing about birds."

She jumped to her feet, and without bothering to say good-bye disappeared down the wooded path, dim with shadow now in the twilight.

Polly sat still, scarlet with indignation. "The horrid, rude thing," she scolded to herself. "'I wouldn't give up anyway, and just sit around and cry about it.' How perfectly horrid." Suddenly she laughed. "I was somewhat tearful. Slightly lachrymose, so to speak."

She stuffed the envelopes into her pocket and stood up. The little song-sparrow flitted into view again and she studied it thoughtfully. "I believe that there is something in what Ada says. I might perhaps try writing some simple little stories about the birds and flowers for the wee little children," she reasoned, her keen mind ever alert to new ideas.

Thrusting her hands deep into her sweater pockets she turned toward home, her mind busy with some lines she had learned in school and which she could not now remember.

" 'There is some soul,' " she repeated to herself; " 'there is some soul'—bother, what comes next? 'Some soul,' then something about 'in things evil.' I wish I could remember it! 'There is some soul.' Oh, I know. 'There is some soul in things evil would men willingly distil it out.' Well, I have to distil it out of the evil of being an unsuccessful authoress!" She stopped and broke off a bit of flowering huckleberry bush to put in her buttonhole. "But to think," she smiled, "that Ada should be my comfort and guide!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE SURPRISE

Mrs. Jameson was waiting on the steps of Pine Cottage for Polly when she came home from school at the noon hour.

"Polly," she cried gayly, "I have a surprise for you! Guess what it is."

Polly's face lighted up. "What?" she asked eagerly. Then determined not to be disappointed, she added, "Ice-cream for luncheon, I suppose."

"No indeed, something much nicer. Guess again."

"Someone has sent us a present."

"Yes, that too. But something nicer."

Polly thought. "Let me see," she hazarded, "either the lawyers have found that we have more money than we thought we have, or somebody nice is coming to see us."

"You're getting warm. Whom would you like to see?"

Polly thought again. " I believe," she said, sinking down on the lowest step with her books balanced on her knee, " that I'd rather see Esther than anyone else."

" Good guess. Esther is coming this afternoon! And Dick and Sam are coming with her. And Jane and Perry and Jack are coming from New York. They are all going to be at the Inn for the week end, and you are to go over there and stay with Margery, too."

Polly bounded up the steps, taking two at a time, and seized her mother around the waist. " Oh, Mother," she squealed, " how perfect! When did it happen? How did it happen? Isn't it perfect? Why didn't you tell me before? "

Mrs. Jameson settled the belt that Polly's frantic hugs had pulled awry. " My dear child, remember you're not a bear! Mrs. Morris and I have been talking about it. She felt that it was lonely here for you two girls and that you ought to have some young society. But she dreaded speaking about it to you, for Margery still gets easily upset over things and can't sleep. And she was afraid that she might get over-excited over anticipations. Besides, if it bid fair to be a stormy week end the others were not to come, and she dreaded having you and Margery disappointed. That would have been worse than if you expected nothing. So we decided that we would keep quiet until we saw how things were going to shape up. Now luncheon will be ready in a minute—run upstairs and brush your hair."

Polly dashed up the stairs to the little room on the third floor, and seizing her hair-brush by its back, attacked her hair as though she were grooming a horse. The luncheon gong sounded while her hair was still hanging about her face like a long dark veil. Without stopping to plait it she tied it back with a ribbon and ran to the door.

"Oh," she exclaimed, as she caught sight of something on the bed, "what's that?"

On her narrow cot-bed a little gray frock was spread out, a knowing little frock, with snowy ruffles at the neck and sleeves. Beside it was a wide black hat of the severely simple variety that Polly liked best.

"Oh!" she exclaimed again, as she held the frock up to her, and inspected the result in the mirror, "isn't it stunning? But Mother oughtn't to have done it. She'll go without something she ought to have to make up for it. I do wish ——"

The luncheon gong sounded again, and Polly ran down-stairs, an anxious little frown between her pretty curved eyebrows.

"Oh, Mother," she whispered, as she sank into her place beside her mother, "it's lovely, but you oughtn't to have bought it, you really shouldn't."

Her mother recognized her anxiety and smiled reassuringly at her, though her attention was claimed just at that moment by a stout and perpetually complaining lady at the other end of the table.

"Yes, Mrs. Wilson," she said soothingly, "I'll have Katie heat some milk for you just as soon as the vegetables are passed. Miss Stanley, I ordered that asparagus especially for you."

Polly waited breathlessly until her mother could turn to her. "It's all right, dear," Mrs. Jameson told her in a low tone. "So don't worry your young heart and head over it. Mrs. Morris was ordering some things for Margery from a shop in New York that makes a specialty of clothes for schoolgirls, and she asked so sweetly to be allowed to order these for you that I couldn't refuse. And I remember when we were able to do things for people what a pleasure it was, so, you see, I know that she was sincere in what she said. She has a blue frock just like yours for Margery, and a big red hat like your black one. We thought the gray dress would be younger than the sombre black for you. The lines are so simple that it ought to fit."

Miss Stanley interrupted her. "Do you know, Polly, that you are eating the wrong end of your asparagus?"

Polly blushed furiously, then joined cheerfully in the laughter of the others. "I was pretty rapt," she admitted.

After luncheon Polly flew up the stairs again to try on the new frock. The lines were so simple that it did fit, as Mrs. Jameson had thought, and was very becoming besides.

"I'll just finish fixing this hem," said her mother, who had followed to see how the frock fitted, "and then it will be perfect. Hadn't you better run off to school now?" she added teasingly.

Polly looked at her mother blankly. "I never thought of school," she murmured.

Mrs. Jameson laughed. "I was merely teasing you. You're excused from school this afternoon."

When Polly came down-stairs attired in the new frock and with the new hat put on at exactly the right angle over her dark hair, which she wore to-day clubbed up at the back of her neck with a black ribbon, like a gay young cavalier, she found the five rest-cure ladies waiting on the veranda.

"We wanted to see how you looked in the dress," explained Mrs. Wilson. "Turn around and let's see the back."

Polly obediently wheeled.

"Well," sighed Mrs. Wilson, "it is nice to have something young about. It keeps you up on things. I think that I'll have my plum broadcloth made over just like this dress of Polly's."

Miss Stanley gave Polly a little push. "Run along, you bad child," she whispered, "or you'll make me laugh at the thought of Mrs. Wilson, two hundred pounds and all, dressed like a girl of fifteen."

Polly flashed back a grateful glance as she ran down the steps. It was so nice, she thought, to have Miss Stanley willing to be friendly.

Margery was watching for her, and as Polly came in sight stuck her head out of the window to call, " Isn't it wonderful? Won't we ——"

Her mother drew her back and closed the window, and Margery flew to meet Polly at the head of the stairs.

" Just as soon as I get my hat on, Polly," she babbled, " we'll go right down to the station to meet Jane and the others. Esther is going to motor over from Renwyck's Town with Sam Bennet and Dick and Elizabeth Bennet—she wanted to visit some friends who have a cottage here, so she announced that she was coming along with the others to give age and respectability."

"Are the others to be right here in the Inn? " asked Polly as soon as she could get a word in edgewise.

" Yes, right in this corridor, and you are to be in my room with me. Oh, look what time it is! We'll have to hurry."

Mrs. Morris came in from the other room while Margery pinned on the big red hat that was the same size and shape as Polly's black one.

"Oh, Mrs. Morris," Polly began, "how can I ever thank you for the lovely, lovely dress? I, well, I ——"

"Yes, isn't it nice to feel that we're twins," Margery cut in; "see, your dress is exactly like this blue one. I wanted a black hat, but Mother thought the red would give me more color. I'm so pale since I was ill. Hurry up. We'll have to tear! You can talk another time!"

She seized Polly's hand, and together, laughing and breathless, they ran down the stairs and out into the spring sunshine.

The railway station at Pine Lake was a tiny one-roomed box set in the woods at one side of a little ravine where a brook meandered and the ferns and wild-flowers grew.

"We have lots of time, you foolish child," laughed Polly as she sat down on one of the hard, straight seats and looked at the clock. "You might have let me stop and talk to your mother."

" Yes, I got over-excited," returned Margery frankly. " It's been so long since I've had any gayety that it went to my head! I'll have to be careful when they get here or I'll be just plain silly."

Polly chuckled; Margery's frankness always amused her. Then she grew silent and thoughtful. " It's hard to realize, isn't it," she said, breaking the pause that had fallen between the two girls, " that it's only a little over three months since we waited like this in the station at Renwyck's Town for Jane and Perry and Jack. So much has happened that we never thought could happen."

" Yes," answered Margery seriously, " it seems as though everything has happened." She, too, grew silent and thoughtful. Her father was in danger; sorrow had come to Polly; might it not come to her?

A long, far-away toot from a locomotive roused her from her revery.

" There's the train," she said, sliding closer to Polly and linking her arm in hers. " We'll have to brace up and look cheerful. Oh," she stopped short.

" What's the matter? "

"We forgot all about it. To-day's the day those boys and girls were going to stay after school and clean the place up for Miss Martin. Mother told Miss Martin to order cake and ice-cream, and I suppose she expects us to come, too."

There was another toot from the locomotive, nearer this time.

"Well, why can't we go? That will make something to do. We'll make everybody pitch in and help. Can't you imagine how funny Jack will be?"

"Killing! Come on out and wait on the platform now."

The train drew in, and the girls ran down the platform to meet Jane and her step-brothers, who were just getting out of the rear coach.

For the first moment everyone felt a little shy and strange. They had not seen Polly since her father's death, and both Jack and Jane felt that they ought to show their sympathy in some way, while Perry was absorbed in watching Margery. In spite of the becoming glow cast by the big red hat he thought that she looked very white and thin, quite dif-

THE GIRLS RAN DOWN THE PLATFORM TO MEET JANE.

ferent from the healthy, sunburnt girl he had known the summer before.

Jack broke the ice by dragging a banana from his pocket which he solemnly presented to Margery.

"He would eat bananas on the way down," Jane explained. "Perry and I were ashamed of him."

"So ashamed that they ate up all the bananas. It was only by the greatest effort that I could save this for you, Margery."

"Thank you very much, Jack. I'll save it as a memento of you."

"Oh, it isn't as a memento of me—it's to remind you of the gorgeous Italian gentleman that I'm sure must have won your heart down here. *Macaroni!*" he warbled, "'*Donna e mobile!*' *Ba-naa-naa!*"

They all laughed and Margery assured him that he was to meet the Italian gentleman a little later in the afternoon, and set him a good example by scrubbing the schoolhouse floor.

After that they all felt at ease, and it was with their old time comradeship that they set off for the short walk beside the lake to the Inn. Jane hung on to Margery's arm, and Perry walked beside them, while Jack attached himself to Polly. But he was forever finding some bird's nest that he had to climb up to look into, or thinking that he had found a new variety of flower or fish or mushroom which he had to stop to investigate.

" I never saw anyone so anxious as Jack to be a naturalist," observed Perry, as Jack, who had lingered over a particularly poisonous-looking toadstool, hallooed for them to wait for him, " and have so little success in it. It's his latest fad."

" Oh, there are the others," cried Polly as a car came in view. " See, there's Esther! "

Esther's rosy face beamed with delight at the sight of her beloved Polly and Margery, and if Dick's and Sam's enthusiasm was less openly expressed it was no less sincere.

" What shall we do now? " asked Margery, turning to Dick as usual for aid.

" Don't you think that it would be a good plan to take the others' bags back to the Inn, and then we can all pile in the car and ride around to see the sights of Pine Lake. I was talking to your mother at the Inn, we stopped there first—and see what you think of the plans we made."

"Come on, Margery," called Sam. "Hop up on the running-board, and I'll run you back to the Inn. Hold on tight, girls."

They were only a stone's throw from the Inn, and Margery had no opportunity to ask Dick what was the plan.

"Dick," she inquired an hour afterward, "what was your scheme?"

They had had cake and lemonade on the Inn veranda, the travellers had unpacked their bags and washed off the cinders and the dust, and now they were all piled into Sam's automobile. The lake had been circled twice, and it had been decided that they might as well head for the schoolhouse.

"I didn't tell you, did I?" Dick answered, turning his gaze from the flight of a wild duck to Margery's face. "Well, it's this: I've been awfully interested in your plan of teaching your foreign neighbors here something about what America means. I think it's a bully idea."

"Yes, isn't it? It took Polly and me to think up a plan like that," Margery answered with an assumed demureness that delighted Dick.

"But why, Madame Self-Satisfaction," he laughed, "do you draw the line and only teach the foreigners what America means? It seems to me that it is Americans who need it the most."

Margery was serious at once. "Yes," she agreed, "that is so. I suppose," wistfully, "that we don't begin to be patriotic."

"The dictionary gives the definition of 'patriot' as 'One who works for the welfare of his country.' Most people think if they brag about it that is enough."

"The chief impression I got from my American history books, when I was a kid," Perry put in, "was that we could lick all creation. And that just being an American meant that you were smarter than the next fellow, particularly if he happened to be a Frenchman or an Englishman. Of course we *are* smarter," he added with a laugh, "but we ought to have a little decent restraint in mentioning it. But what's your grand scheme, Dicky-bird?"

"It's this. It's just along the line of what you said about our history books. How are people going to understand America unless they know more about her real history? Now I thought it would be fun to go to see the places where the beginnings of her history were made."

Margery and Perry looked blank. "How do you mean?" they asked in chorus.

"Why, I mean to go to see the place where they drew up the Declaration of Independence and the place where they signed it, and the little house where the first flag was made—and then did you know that the first protest against slavery was written in America? We ought to see where that was done. And we ought to try to understand—as well as boneheads like Perry here can," and he gave Perry a friendly dig in the ribs, "what it has all meant to the world."

"Do you mean, Dick," asked Margery, "that we ought to go up to Philadelphia and see all these places? We've seen Independence Hall."

"Yes, but your friend Ada and the rest probably haven't."

"Do you mean to take them—and how would we get there?"

"By automobile, of course. It isn't such an endlessly long trip. In fact we ought to be able to do it in something over an hour."

"That's a mighty fine scheme, sonny," agreed Perry, "and I'm for it every time. But can you tell me, little maid, how you expect us all to pile into one car? If we bring all of Polly's schoolmates it might be a trifle hard on the springs."

Dick gave him another friendly punch and Perry punched back.

"Oh, boys," implored Margery as their blows came perilously near her head, "do have mercy on my hat. It's the only new one I've had this year!"

"Yea, yea!" encouraged Sam from the front seat. "Have a good time, children, but be careful of the ladies' millinery."

Laughing, the boys stopped their scuffling and settled quietly back in their places, while Margery settled her hat. "A big chapeau isn't quite the thing for motoring," she observed mildly, "especially when one is with children or lunatics."

Dick and Perry bowed solemnly in token of the compliment, while Jack, always dramatic, smote his forehead and clutched at the air in mock despair.

"You geese," said Polly severely, "now do be quiet and let Dick tell us how we are to get to Philadelphia."

"Why, it's this way," Dick explained. "Grandfather thinks that it is high time we boys did something to try to return some of the girls' hospitality. You girls have all been mighty sweet about having us boys at your houses—and it's especially charitable toward that worthless beggar Perry there."

Margery held out a firm hand. "Wait until you get out of the car to fight that out," she laughed. "Go on, Dick."

"So I stopped at the garage here this afternoon and found that we can hire a car and a good reliable chauffeur for to-morrow. I spoke to Mrs. Morris about it, as well as I could for the noise you all made—she is going to think about it some more and if she is willing we will go to-morrow morning. Some of us in this car and some in the other. And as there will be two extra places, I thought perhaps you would like to take your friends Ada and Rosa, and show Ada something of what this detested country has done."

Polly and Margery looked at each other rapturously. "It would be fine to take Ada, wouldn't it?" Margery said.

"Fine," agreed Polly.

"What's that forlorn shanty ahead of us?" asked Jack. "Is that the schoolhouse?"

"That's the palace," returned Polly, "where your lordship is going to help scrub the floor. Oh, look, Margery, there is Mr. Beacon standing by the road there."

Sam drew up with a flourish that he had practised long to achieve and they all got out. The others went into the schoolhouse, but Margery lingered to speak to Mr. Beacon.

"Well, it's wonderful what those ferns and fixin' have done," Mr. Beacon commented, gravely inspecting the schoolhouse, his head thrust forward on his long body, and his hands deep in his pockets. "Yes, it's wonderful."

The laurel and the honeysuckle banked up against the building were not in bloom yet, but their greenness hid something of the dilapidation of the unpainted frame wall. The ferns were slowly unfolding and the blue of the lupins and the white of the turkey beard gave a note of gayety.

"Those laurel bushes and the holly and cedar bushes will be green in the winter, too, Mr. Beacon."

"That's so. Yes, the place would look real nice if the grass wasn't trampled out. It seems like we ought to fix up a playground somewhere back of the building so that the grass around the front could be kept nice. I think I'll come over some morning and sow some grass seed—if you'll undertake to keep the children from trampling it before it ever gets a chance to grow."

"Indeed I will," Margery promised rashly.

"What's going on in there?"

"Oh, some of the boys and girls have stayed after school to clean the room for Miss Martin—you know she usually has to do all the work a janitor would do. They are having refreshments and making quite a party out of it."

"Hmmm. Think that scrubbing will make much difference to it?"

"No, it's really kept very clean already.

What it needs is some fresh paint and paper. But of course that isn't any of my business, and I oughtn't to be concerning myself in it, I suppose."

"Hmm."

"Do you see that boy over there?" remarked Margery, thinking that it was time perhaps to change the subject. "That boy who just came to the door with a broom in his hand?"

"Yes. What about him?"

"It's so funny! He has plagued the life out of a boy named Bucci because he scrubbed floors for his mother when she was sick. He tells the Bucci boy that scrubbing is 'woman's work.' So do a lot of the others for that matter. Of course he absolutely scorned the idea of staying at school to scrub or clean, and made a fuss about it. And then when he found there were to be refreshments he had an awful time to back down and pretend that he always believed in making himself useful. My friend Polly Jameson was telling me about it and we were both so amused."

"Those boys and girls that just went in there were friends of yours?"

"Yes, they're spending the week end with us, and they are going to help, too."

"Well, it strikes me I'd better do some helping myself. Guess I might do some carpentering on those shutters, and a coat of whitewash inside and out would help."

"Why don't you make the children work with you? Remember, you said when you do a thing yourself you always value it more."

Mr. Beacon looked at her in admiration. "Well, if you aren't the beatingest girl to remember what I said! Hello! That's a good sign!"

"What's a good sign?" asked Margery, moving toward the schoolhouse to join the others.

Mr. Beacon pointed to two crows that had just alighted on the ridge-pole of the school roof. "Those crows," he said briefly.

"Are crows a good sign?"

"Don't you know the old saying? 'One for sorrow, two for mirth.' We'll have to see what we can do to help the crows along and have some more mirth in the school—make it a brighter, prettier place, and something in the community life."

CHAPTER XVII

HISTORIC SHRINES

"THERE was an old chap about a hundred years ago," remarked Dick, "who wrote a book called 'A Pleasant Peregrination through the Prettiest Parts of Pennsylvania, by Peregrine Prolix.' Grandfather has a copy of it."

"That's what we will be doing as soon as we get off this ferry," laughed Margery. "Having a 'pleasant peregrination.' Well, we'll be in Pennsylvania in a few minutes."

They were on the ferry that crossed the wide Delaware to Philadelphia. Early that morning they had left Pine Lake, motored in the first dewy freshness of the day through the woods and the rich farming country beyond, and now in the middle of the morning were close to the objects of their trip.

"Where shall we go first?" asked Jane.

"Well," said Dick, slowly, "we can't see everything. What would you like most of all?"

"Oh, I don't know. You're boss of this expedition."

"Rosa, what do you want to see first?"

"Da movin' pictures."

Dick was plainly somewhat dashed. "Well ——" he said vaguely. "What about you, Ada?"

"I don't care," answered Ada curtly. She had been secretly much pleased to be invited to join the party, but she took care to conceal that fact from her hosts and hostesses.

"Suppose we go back and ask Mother," suggested Margery, and together she and Dick picked their way along the crowded deck of the ferry-boat to the other automobile.

"It's no use, Dick, just showing them battlefields and things like that," Margery declared. "We ought to show them the places where something was done like signing the first protest against slavery, or something like that. Don't you think so, Mother?"

"Yes, dear. Your words are rather vague and involved. But I think I see your meaning. We must visit the places where great ideals came into being, not just places of worldly advancement. Suppose, Dick, that we go first to Independence Hall and look at the portrait of Penn."

Margery had been before to the beautiful, dignified old State House, and she and Dick looked at each other and laughed as they thought of the fun they had had there before.

Rosa's big brown eyes opened wide at the serene and mellow beauty of the old building. " It is so pretty," she said softly to Polly. " I like da things dat is pretty."

Jane was delighted. " Why, it's beautiful, Margery! Ever so much more so than modern buildings."

But Ada was scornfully silent. " Oh, yes, it is beautiful," she said at last, when Margery pressed her for an opinion. " There are beautiful buildings in all countries."

" That is true," agreed Mrs. Morris tactfully. "And now we must go and look at the picture of Penn."

Smiling a little to herself she led Ada through the building until they stopped before the portrait of Penn as a young man.

" What do you know about William Penn, Ada? " she asked.

" Oh, I have read about him. Pennsylvania is named after him, and you see his pictures in the advertisements."

"He always struck me as an awfully uninteresting old boy," observed Perry. "So fat and pudgy—looks as though he needed more exercise."

"You dreadful children!" cried Mrs. Morris. "And yet I don't know that I blame you. The advertisements are rather dreadful. But just look at that portrait! That isn't fat and pudgy!"

She waved her hand toward the painting of the handsome, manly boy, in steel breastplate and lace cravat, and the long curls of the cavalier flowing over his armor-clad shoulders.

"See how beautiful those dark eyes are," she said, "and what a charming mouth he had. Someone, when he was alive, once described him as 'the handsomest, best looking and liveliest of gentlemen.'"

"Didn't he call the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford 'a poor mushroom'?" asked Polly.

Mrs. Morris laughed. "Yes, I believe he did when there was some trouble at college over Penn's taking up the Quaker faith. But he was more than a handsome, high-spirited boy, he was a great dreamer of dreams who made his visions into reality.

" It is almost impossible for us in these days of religious toleration, when anyone may worship God as he pleases, to realize what a great experiment it was considered for Penn to open up a new colony where all might worship as they please, where laws and taxes were to be equally fair to Quaker, Catholic, Congregationalist or Jew."

"And he treated the Indians fairly too," said Polly. " I suppose they considered that terribly reckless! "

" Dreadfully. To treat the poor Indian with kindness and to make allowances for his being an Indian was considered little short of wicked by some of the other colonists. But Penn's ' Holy Experiment,' as it was called, was the beginning of a great movement toward liberty and tolerance, and it seemed only a step from that to the document that was signed in this very building, the Declaration of Independence, which set forth the right of all to ' life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' "

"And now," said Dick, as they turned away from the portrait, " suppose we go out to Germantown and see the little old house where the first protest against slavery was signed, and incidentally see a pretty old town, and then after luncheon we'll visit Carpenter's Hall, where the First Continental Congress was held, and the Betsy Ross House, where the first flag was made, and all the 'hother hobjects hof hinterest,' as the old Englishman we have at the farm now would say!"

Ada was silent as they got into the automobiles again and went out through the city to the wide beautiful drive in the park beside the pretty, lazy Schuylkill River. Rosa chattered gayly away with the others, interested in the amusing sights along the way, and in the quaint little house once belonging to William Penn which they passed in the park.

"You don't know much more about America than I do," Ada said suddenly to Margery.

"That is so," Margery admitted frankly. "I know enough to love it, though."

Jack was bored by Ada's seriousness. "I have heard it said—by myself, it is true"—he remarked, "that a little love is a dangerous thing, and a little lover more dangerous."

"Gracious," exclaimed Margery, "I suppose the first thing we know we'll be grown up and have to have lovers! How perfectly horrible! I'd never thought of that!"

Dick looked at her and laughed. "In the meantime, prepare yourself by looking at those sheep. Aren't they picturesque?"

"Thank you for the compliment, Dick. I suppose you mean to imply that the only lovers I'm likely to have are mutton-heads?"

"Perhaps so," said Dick shortly.

In the other car they were also discussing lovers.

"I'm sure it is," Esther was maintaining stoutly.

"But why," Polly was asking, "didn't she marry him?"

"Because she was needed at home, her parents were old and sick, and he had his mother to support, and he was awfully poor. And, well, somehow they drifted apart."

"But are you sure he's the one?"

"Almost. He sounds as though he were."

"Do you mean to say, Esther, that Deborah Davis was once engaged to the Mr. Beacon who is on the school board?" put in Mrs. Morris.

"I don't know that it was that Mr. Beacon, Mrs. Morris. But her sister came to visit her about a month ago. Mother met her and she told her that years ago Deborah was almost engaged to a man named Beacon and that she hadn't heard of him for years. Her sister said the family were always sorry she hadn't married him, for he really cared for her. Beacon is such a queer name that I think it might be the same one."

"Oh, I'm sure it is," Polly cried enthusiastically. "Couldn't we have Deborah over, Mrs. Morris, and have them meet again? It would be so romantic!"

"You ridiculous children! It may not be the same man at all. But I do want to have Deborah over some time—not to poke her at any Mr. Beacon, but because we would enjoy her society. Margery is devoted to her."

They left the river-drive and wound up the hill through the pleasant streets of Germantown to the quaint old winding Main Street, where stands the little house in which the first protest against slavery was signed.

"I wonder how much of this means anything to Ada," said Mrs. Morris as they passed some handsome old Colonial houses, in one of which Washington had lived. "I think that I shall have to offer a prize for the best paper on patriotism and see what happens."

The cars stopped before a little old house, and they got out to read the inscription by its door.

"How strange it seems," said Mrs. Morris, "that only two hundred years ago the idea of slavery should have been accepted perfectly placidly all over the world. And how opinion against it evolved. First religious liberty, then political liberty, and then personal liberty for everyone."

"You see, Ada," said Polly, it must be confessed rather triumphantly, "we have done some little things in America to make the world better."

"And I should have liked to add," Polly confided to Esther as she took her place again in the automobile, "that we did them some time before Ada came here to teach us. But I really was too polite!"

CHAPTER XVIII

LITTLE LUCY

MARGERY was sitting on the steps of the Inn porch composing a letter to Jane. She was trying to make it an unusually amusing letter and an interesting one, too, for Jane had confessed that she read parts of Margery's letters to her mother and stepbrothers.

Whenever she had been with Jack and Perry she had thoroughly enjoyed their society and thought them pleasant, friendly boys, and had teased Jack or talked more seriously with Perry in her usual natural unconscious fashion. But now they had suddenly seemed to grow into vague unreal people who had her letters read to them, and who perhaps made comments upon her epistolary style; comments that might not be favorable.

With painstaking care as to spelling and a rather forced wit she wrote down an account of old Mrs. Harrison and her daughter who sat at the next table in the dining-room. Then with a sigh she crossed it out. "Perry and Jack wouldn't be interested in two old ladies," she told herself.

Nothing coming into her mind to take the place of the crossed out words, she sat biting the end of her fountain pen and staring out at the lake, while common sense slowly returned to her.

"Boo," she said at last taking a fresh piece of paper, "what a double-dyed goose I am! I'll write a sensible letter to Jane about the things that will interest her, and forget all about the boys. They're making me silly and self-conscious."

She had just finished a cheerful, friendly little letter, when she spied Polly coming along the lake road.

"Hello, Polly! What's the excitement? You're coming as though the witches were after you!"

"Or the Indians," laughed Polly, sitting down on the step beside Margery. "That reminds me of the time when I was about ten and I wrote a very hair-raising adventure story. In it I made my heroine see her lover being chased by the Indians, and cry out, 'Oh, the Indians are after him, and he is coming somewhat quickly.' I was reading it aloud to Father and Mother and when I came to that part, Father looked at Mother and said very quietly, 'Yes, I should think that he would come somewhat quickly if the Indians were after him.' Oh, I was teased about it for years."

Margery laughed in sympathy. She knew that Polly loved to speak of her father, and of all the pleasant trifling incidents of their life together.

"I've come to see if you can't spend the night with me," Polly went on. "Mrs. Stenton is coming down over Sunday to see how the cottage is being run—a tour of inspection, in fact. She wrote to Mother to have the sleeping-cabin opened up, as she would sleep there. So Mother had it cleaned and aired and all the beds made up. Mrs. Stenton is bringing the little girl she adopted and a nurse. That's why she wants the cabin opened—she thinks it would be quieter for the baby there.

"I'm to sleep in the cabin, too, to act as watch-dog, and save Mrs. Stenton from burglars and highwaymen. And also to run and fetch for them. Mrs. Stenton and company, I mean; not the burglars and highwaymen. As it's Friday Mother said I could ask you to spend the night with me there. Come along,—there's a lamb."

"I'd love to. Come in while I persuade Mother. Ever since the first day we peeked into the windows of the sleeping-cabin I've been crazy to stay in it. It is the duckiest little place. Come on, we'll go up-stairs to Mother."

Margery had been so infinitely better of late that Mrs. Morris was at first inclined to take no risks. "You're looking like a different child from what you were a week ago, and I do so want to take you home well and strong. The cabin has been closed all winter and I am afraid you will feel the change from the warm Inn."

"But, Mother, it has been all warmed and aired for Mrs. Stenton. She's bringing a baby there, you know. And, Mother-lamby-dear, I'll promise, solemnly promise, not to contract leprosy, cholera, or bubonic plague. Neither to get chilled nor overheated. And I swear not to jump out of the window or slide down the roof. Is there anything else that might happen to me? Anyway, I'll promise not to let it happen."

"Not a thing, you ridiculous child! Well, run along, but be careful about taking cold. Take your warm wrapper with you, and your sweater."

On their way to Pine Cottage the girls met a stiffly starched white-clad nurse and an unusually pretty little girl of about three.

"That's Mrs. Stenton's little adopted daughter," Polly explained. "Isn't she a little beauty?"

"Isn't she, though! A perfect beauty! Do you know, Polly, she looks Italian with those dark eyes and that hair. She reminds me a little of the Bucci children. If they were scrubbed up, and dressed like this child, they would really be as pretty. Especially the youngest."

"Yes, I believe that they would. Isn't this one daintily dressed?"

They stopped and tried to speak to the child, but she drew back shyly.

"Speak to the young ladies, Lucy," urged the nurse.

Whimpering, the child seized a corner of her nurse's apron and tried to hide under it.

"Oh, now, Lucy, don't do that! Come out, speak to the nice young ladies. Can't you shake hands with them?"

"No—no," protested Lucy.

"We had better not pay any attention to her," suggested Polly, and both girls affected an absorbing interest in a scarlet tanager perched on a near-by bush. In a moment they were rewarded by the sight of a pair of great brown eyes peeping at them from under the edge of the apron.

"See the pretty bird," remarked Polly to no one in particular.

"Lucy see a birdie," a little hand was tucked in hers.

"Well, you're a dear little chick-a-biddy," laughed Margery as with a parting wave to the baby she and Polly went on their way.

"Mother is really quite nervous over this visit of Mrs. Stenton's," confided Polly.

"Yes, I should think she would be. Is Mrs. Stenton very awe-inspiring?"

"She doesn't look a bit distinguished—yet somehow she is terrifying. I can't describe it."

"It must be pretty bad if you can't describe it."

Mrs. Stenton was standing on the veranda steps of Pine Cottage as the girls drew near it. She was a little dark stout woman with a high nose and an air of being overwhelmed by her own importance.

"She looks as though she had on an invisible diamond crown," whispered Margery.

"Sh, sh, don't make me giggle."

"Did you see the baby?" Mrs. Stenton inquired, as soon as they came close to the steps.

"Yes, Mrs. Stenton," they both answered at once. "And she was so sweet and funny."

Mrs. Stenton's face softened. "She is a dear little girl, isn't she?" she answered.

"Oh, she's darling."

"Margery," asked Polly, "did you notice how Mrs. Stenton's face softened when she spoke of the baby this afternoon? Evidently she is crazy about her."

The two girls were sitting on the steps of the sleeping-cabin, enjoying the soft spring twilight. It was after dinner and Mrs. Stenton and the ladies of Pine Cottage were gathered in its pleasant drawing-room. The baby had been put to sleep in one of the up-stairs rooms of the sleeping-cabin, and her nurse was sitting in the little down-stairs sitting-room, reading a newspaper and rocking in a stiff little chair that gave forth a protesting squeak.

"Think of sitting indoors on an evening like this," observed Polly.

"That laurel bush looks like a ghost, doesn't it? And, oh, Polly, isn't the air sweet?"

A tiny breeze had sprung up, heavy with the scent of white azalea and the creamy magnolia buds. The laurel bushes just coming into flower glimmered white against the dark trunks of the pines, and in the soft gray light the woods beyond grew mysteriously beautiful. High up in the trees the birds sang their vespers or called sleepily.

"Polly!" Margery exclaimed suddenly in a whisper, "did you see that?"

"Did I see what?"

"Sh, don't speak so loud! There was something creeping along back of those trees over there!"

"Where?"

"There. Those trees over there. It looked like a man."

The girls sat tense, watching the edge of the clearing.

"I can't see a thing," Polly said at last. "You must have imagined it, Margery."

"No, I'm sure I saw something."

"Perhaps it was a cow," suggested Polly cheerfully. "They often stray away and wander through the woods. Are you warm enough? Remember, I have to take care of you."

"Plenty. But I'm sure I saw something."

The darkness grew deeper. The birds quieted down and went to sleep, and there was no sound beyond the soft rustling of the wind in the pines. Polly and Margery sat with their arms about each other, sharing Polly's big cape. When they spoke it was in whispers as though the mystery of the night had awed them.

"Margery, you're sleepy," pronounced Polly, rousing herself at last. "Let's go up to bed."

"Let's."

"I'll have to run over to the cottage and get my dressing-gown. I forgot to bring it. Oh, oh, ouch!"

Polly had started for the cottage and fallen violently over something in the dark.

“ Polly, what is it? Are you hurt? What happened? ”

Polly sat up and rubbed her knee. “ I came a cropper, didn’t I? I caught my foot in something.”

Margery bent over and rubbed her hands across the grass. “ Why, how funny, Polly. There’s a ladder lying here. That’s what you caught your foot in. No wonder you fell.”

“ Oh, yes, the painter left it here. They are going to paint the cottage soon. I’m not hurt. Just jarred.”

She got up and limping a little went on to the cottage.

“ I brought some crackers with me,” she said as she came back. “ Let’s go up to bed now.”

Candle in hand, the girls climbed the stairs and went into the little room at the back of the house they were to share.

“ Gracious, what’s that? ” exclaimed Margery as she put her candle down on the bureau.

“ Only Mrs. Stenton coming in,” answered Polly sleepily.

The front door closed and they could hear the bolt being shot home, and then came the rustle of silken skirts as Mrs. Stenton climbed the stairs to her room.

"How gloomy those woods over there look—spooky," Margery observed as she raised the shade and opened the windows.

"You're nervous to-night, Margie," laughed Polly, thumping her pillow into a roll. "This cot is as hard as a brickbat."

"Mine's so soft I roll right into the middle. Oh, dear me, I feel as though I were sinking clear through to China! You'll have to haul me out in the morning."

"Good-night," answered Polly sleepily. "I'll—I'll ——" The rest was lost in a drowsy murmur.

Margery lay awake for a while. She felt nervous and jumpy, and her mind kept returning to her father in France. Where was he? What was he doing? How was he faring?

At last she grew quieter and drifted off to sleep.

Suddenly she found herself sitting up in bed, every nerve tense. "Polly," she whispered. "Polly, what is it?"

There was no sound but Polly's gentle even breathing.

Margery lay down again. She had been dreaming that she had reached college at last and that she was captain of the basket-ball team. Then something had seemed to happen; a bandit had swooped down on her team and carried off her best player, leaving her in despair.

" It's just a bad dream you've had," she told herself, and lying down again she drew the covers closer and tried to go to sleep.

Suddenly she sat bolt upright again.

There was a noise!

From under the window there came a shuffling sound, and then another, as though something were being slowly and cautiously dragged close to the house.

For a second it seemed to her that her heart had risen up into her throat and were going to strangle her. Again she heard the soft dragging shuffle. Hastily slipping out of bed she stole to the window.

But she could see nothing.

Again she heard the noise, but fainter now, as though it came from around the corner of the house. Cautiously she stole back to Polly's bed and shook her.

"What's—what's the matter?" demanded Polly sleepily.

"Sh, sh," she whispered fiercely, her hand on Polly's mouth. "There's a queer noise down-stairs. I heard it."

"Nonsense," said Polly indifferently, turning over. "You're nervous to-night. Let me go to sleep."

Margery shook her again. "Polly," she insisted, "there is something wrong. I know it."

Polly sat up, wider awake now. "What did you hear?" she demanded.

"A queer noise, as though something were being dragged about the house."

Polly swung her feet out of bed and felt for her slippers.

"Polly! What are you going to do?"

"I'm going down to see what it is."

Margery clutched Polly by her long braid of brown hair. "Polly," she implored in an agonized whisper. "You mustn't! It isn't safe! I won't let you."

Polly hesitated. "Well, anyway," she whispered back, "I'm going to go and look out of that little window in the linen closet. That's on the other side of the house and you can see all that side from it. Sh! Sh! If it isn't anything, and we wake Mrs. Stenton, she'll have a fit."

With hands that trembled a little, Polly groped for the door, and cautiously opened it. A long ray of moonlight from a window in the front of the hall fell across the floor. She hesitated a moment and clutched Margery, who had followed close behind her.

"Polly, are you scared?" whispered Margery.

"Awfully."

Trembling, the girls stole across the narrow hall to the little linen closet. There they paused and listened.

Suddenly they clutched each other again. "Polly! That's the noise I heard!"

"We'll have to open the window before we can look out. Oh, I hope it won't squeak."

"Oh, Margery! Thank goodness it's open. I opened it to-day and forgot to close it. Thank goodness! Now then, I'm going to look out."

With a queer, dazed feeling that she was in a dream, and that yet in all her life long she had never done anything but just stand in that dark little hole of a linen closet and clutch Polly around the waist while she leaned from that little window, Margery stood waiting.

Suddenly Polly drew back. "He looked up," she gasped. "I'm afraid he saw me!"

"He?"

"Yes, there's a man there. I can see him in the moonlight. He's doing something to the ladder. He's ——"

Polly was deserted. Margery had vanished. "Margery," she whispered shrilly, "where are you? What has happened?"

More frightened at Margery's disappearance than at the thought of the man outside, Polly tiptoed back to her room.

At the door she collided with Margery. "Oh," they both gasped. "Oh!"

"I've got our pitcher of water," Margery explained. "I'm going to pour it on him!"

Hanging on to each other, they went into a fit of silent laughter. The midnight visit had suddenly ceased to be terrifying. It was funny now.

Again they crossed the moonlit hall, and with the pitcher carefully balanced in her hands Margery leaned from the window.

" I can't see anything," she complained. " Oh, there he is! He's got the ladder up! "

She raised the pitcher. There was a splash of water, a startled exclamation, and the sound of something heavy falling.

Again the girls clasped each other in a silent paroxysm of the giggles. " I'm sure he must be surprised," Margery breathed. " There was a lot of water in that pitcher." She peeped out again. " There isn't anyone there. And the ladder is lying on the ground."

Little Lucy cried out suddenly. They listened. They could hear the nurse quieting her, and then the house settled down to silence once more.

" We mustn't get Mrs. Stenton excited before morning," Polly cautioned, and they stole back to their beds.

" I think the man was scared off, and he probably won't be back again, but still I'm not going to sleep again to-night! " Margery declared. She was excited and triumphant now. The nervous, frightened feeling she had at first had passed off, and she felt as though she could laugh and chatter until morning.

"I wonder why Mrs. Stenton didn't hear us," she went on.

"Oh, remember her room is at the front of the house and we are at the back. Besides, I heard Mother say one day that all these rooms in the cabin are sound-proof."

"What do you suppose the man was after? Do you suppose Mrs. Stenton has some wonderful jewels with her?"

"Oh, Margery, of course she has! I'm going to sit up all night!"

"So am I." Margery sat up in bed and drew her knees up to her chin. With a sigh she folded her arms on her knees and leaned her head on her arms. She suddenly realized that she felt very weak and tired.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SEARCH

"WELL, I must say," Margery remarked the next day, "that people are taking our bravery very coolly. Here we rescued them from burglars, and perhaps saved their fair lives, and they take it very calmly and insist that we were dreaming."

The girls were playing clock-golf in the small ground back of the Inn. Polly waited to watch her ball roll triumphantly into the cup before she answered.

"Yes, I thought that they would be so excited, too!"

"Do you suppose that we really could have dreamed it? But I'm sure that I remember stealing across that hall in the moonlight. The floor felt so cold!"

"Nonsense! Of course we didn't dream it! We both wouldn't have dreamed the same thing, anyway. Besides, the ladder was on the other side of the house from what it is now when I fell over it."

"Yes, of course, that's true. I forgot the ladder."

"I believe there is something in what Miss Stanley says. She insists that someone was trying to steal the ladder. Those long painters' ladders are expensive, and no doubt some of these people around here would be very glad to have one, to climb up on to patch the shingles of their roofs."

"Well, anyway, the man got a surprise when that cold water came down on him," laughed Margery. "Oh, is it my turn?"

The girls forgot the incident of the night before in the interest of their game and it was almost luncheon time when they stopped playing.

As they went toward the Inn Mrs. Morris came to meet them. "Your mother just 'phoned, Polly, that Mrs. Stenton has hired an automobile and they are all going for a ride. They had early lunch and won't be back until five, or a little later. You're to have luncheon here with us, but it is arranged that you are to go home in the afternoon to keep an eye on things."

"Did they take the baby?"

"No, she is there with the nurse. I think that your mother just wants you to see that the table is properly set for dinner to-night, and that things are dusted and in order. Mrs. Stenton insisted on her going too, but it makes it a little hard on her to be away and get her housekeeping done."

After luncheon Margery walked home with Polly. Margery was to take her afternoon nap in the hammock on the veranda of Pine Cottage, and Polly had promised to see that she was well wrapped up in steamer rugs.

"I feel horribly sleepy after last night," Margery sighed as Polly spread a soft warm rug over her, and wrapped it round her feet. "Oh," she yawned. "Oh! What are you doing with all those books?"

"Hunting for some more 'pearls and oysters.' I can't let Ada get too far ahead of me."

Margery smothered another yawn. "I thought the trip up to the city that day would make Ada rather more 'haffable,' as our old

English cook used to say. But when I saw her the other day she scowled at me dreadfully."

"She's been awfully queer lately—almost as though she had something on her mind. And sometimes she seems rather scared and repentant about something, and the next minute she is hard and indifferent. But I forgot to tell you that she said you were 'kinda nice.' That's the highest praise I've ever heard her give anyone."

Margery laughed and tucked a cushion more comfortably under her cheek. "It's quite an art to sleep in a hammock," she murmured. "I—I ——" She was silent.

Polly, glancing up a few minutes later, smiled to see her fast asleep. "She's getting so much better," she thought tenderly, leaning forward to tuck in a loose end of the rug. "In the past few days she has seemed to bloom right out. She looks so much rosier, and so much plumper. Well, I suppose that they will be going home any time now. I wonder when we will go. I wonder if we will be able to get back to Renwyck's Town next winter."

Polly, too, was tired from the night before, and sad and anxious thoughts came to harass her. Usually she fought such thoughts bravely, but to-day she let the tears roll down unchecked.

" If only my stories had been taken," she sobbed.

Margery slept on unheeding and Polly had her cry " out," as she was fond of expressing it.

"An' there's the baby goin' fer her walk," said the Irish waitress at the door. "Ach, Miss Polly, you've bin cryin'! "

" Just a little weep, Mary. Yes, there's the baby. Isn't she a duck? Sh, I mustn't make so much noise. Miss Margery is asleep."

The nurse came down the steps of the cabin and put the baby into a little go-cart. Polly and Mary ran down the steps and across the little strip of grass.

" Oh, you cunning wee thing," Polly cried, leaning over the baby. " Have you had a nice sleep, dear? "

The baby, who had grown less shy with Polly, smiled, and holding her fat little hands in front of her face peeped through her fingers.

Polly was enchanted. " Oh, you adorable little duck, you! " she cried, dropping down on her knees before the go-cart. The baby, as a further proof of friendliness, held out her doll. "She *is* pretty, isn't she?" Polly remarked to the nurse as she danced the doll up and down and made it bow to little Lucy. "I mean the baby, not the doll."

"Everybody says she's a remarkably beautiful child, ma'am."

Mary put in a question. "An' where did Mrs. Stenton adopt her from? Was it from an asylum whatever, the blessed lamb?"

"Oh, no, they say it was from somewhere down here. I've only been with her a few months. But this is the first time I've ever nursed an adopted child—my children have always come from the best families."

Polly suppressed a smile at the nurse's lofty air, and went on playing with the baby.

"Where are you going to take her?" she asked as the nurse showed unmistakable signs of desiring to move on.

"Oh, down the road to that little summer-house there. It is away from the lake and there is a nice dry sandy place for Lucy to play."

Polly glanced at the rather lurid-looking novel stuck in behind the cushions of the go-cart and guessed that little Lucy would have to amuse herself.

Margery roused as Polly and Mary came up the steps. "Zat ze baby?" she muttered sleepily.

Polly laughed. "Yes, 'zat ze baby,' old sleepy head. I'm glad that nurse is going to take her to the little summer-house and not near the lake. There's a novel sticking up back of the cushions of the go-cart, and I know that nurse is just the kind that will be so absorbed in reading that she will forget all about the baby."

"I wish I had something to read myself."

"All right, I'll go and get you something. Which will you have, Treasure Island, or Miss Stanley's biographical dictionary?"

"Treasure Island. I feel too lazy to hunt 'pearls and oysters' to-day—even if Ada does get ahead of me."

"I know she's going to get ahead of me—but still I'm going to make her work."

A light little breeze sprang up and whispered through the pine-trees. "It's clouding over, Polly. I believe we are going to have rain. Perhaps I'd better be going home."

"Oh, no, wait a while and I'll lend you my raincoat and overshoes if it rains."

The girls went on with their reading and Margery was just setting sail for the Treasure Island when someone near her asked anxiously:

"Oh, have you seen little Lucy?"

Margery peeped over the side of the hammock. The nurse, her face as white as her stiffly starched apron, was standing in the path by the porch.

"The baby? Why, no, I haven't seen her! Have you, Polly?"

Polly got up and went to the veranda railing. "How do you mean? Haven't you got the baby with you?"

"No, ma'am. I—I looked down just for a minute, and when I looked up again I couldn't see her nowheres. And she had been right before my eyes just that very second!"

"Did you call her?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've called and called, and I've looked everywhere. I thought maybe she had run back here to see you."

The nurse began to whimper. "Oh, what

shall I do? If she's lost I don't know what Mrs. Stenton will do to me!"

Margery slipped out of the hammock. "Come on, Polly. We'll have to go and look for her."

Polly looked searchingly at the book the woman still held in her hand. "Have you any idea how long you were 'looking down' at that book?"

"No—no, ma'am. But it wasn't long."

"Polly," Margery asked anxiously, "you don't suppose that the baby could have fallen into the lake, do you?"

Frightened, the nurse began to cry, and tried to hide the book under her apron.

"Come on, Margery, we'll have to go down to the summer-house and see if we can find her. Come on!"

Together they ran down the path to the summer-house in the little clearing beyond. A thick hedge of bushes hid it from the house, and on the other side there was a grove of low-growing trees between it and what was known as the "back road."

They skirted the bushes, calling "Lucy! Lucy!"

No little piping voice answered.

"Lucy! Lucy! Where are you, dear?"

"It was right here that I was sitting—and she was playing right there in front of me as good as gold."

"Lucy! Lucy!"

"An' I just looked down for a second! And when I looked up she was gone!"

"Perhaps she's hiding," suggested Margery, peeping under every bush.

"She couldn't have crawled under the summer-house, could she, and got caught?" and Polly threw herself down on the ground to peer under the little rustic building. "No, she isn't there."

"You don't suppose, do you, Polly, that she can have wandered off by the lake?"

"I'll go and see if there is any trace of her and you can look through the grove there."

The ground was soft and muddy near the lake and any footprints would have showed distinctly. "She hasn't been there, I'm sure," Polly reported with relief, as she came back to the summer-house. "There isn't the sign of a footprint, and I'm sure the marks of even her tiny feet would be there."

"Polly, what's that?"

"What?" said Polly.

"That! That white thing over there!"

With Polly close behind her, Margery made her way through the undergrowth of the little grove to something white that was lying near its outer edge.

"It's her doll—Polly, it's her doll!"

The doll lay huddled on its face, one arm pathetically outstretched.

"She's been here, Margery—that's evident. Oh, that careless woman not to have watched her!"

"She must have got through here to the back road. Well, anyway, she can't have gone far. She's probably down the road somewhere. Lucy! Oh, Lucy!"

"Yes, her fat little legs can't have taken her very far. You go that way and I'll go this. Perhaps we'll catch up to her."

There were a few houses clustered along the road, mainly the homes of the various employees of the Inn and the two large boarding-houses. At each of the little cottages, Margery stopped to inquire if they had seen a little girl.

"No, I ain't seen a soul," a woman, leaning over the gate of one of the yards, assured her, "and I've bin waitin' here quite a spell for my little girl. I sent her to the store for some yeast and I'm waitin' for her to come back. The little girl you're after must have gone the other way."

Margery turned back. Perhaps Polly had already found little Lucy and it would be well not to get too far away. As she drew near the edge of the grove she saw Polly coming toward her waving her arm violently. Margery ran forward.

"Have you found her?" she called.

"No, but the little girl back there says she has seen her."

"Where?"

"This child here," and Polly indicated a forlorn-looking girl who trailed along after her, "says she saw a woman carrying a baby that sounded from the description like Lucy. They were going in that direction. The baby was crying hard."

Margery stopped and took a long breath. "Perhaps she found the baby and saw she was frightened and lost."

"Yes, but why did she take her in that direction, instead of taking her to the Inn or some of the cottages? I should think that she could tell by her clothes that she belonged there."

Margery glanced warningly toward the girl, who was plainly all ears. "Perhaps she was going in that direction anyway and just took Lucy along. Do you know where this road leads to?"

"Yes, it takes us past the Buccis'."

"We'd better go along then. Perhaps Mrs. Bucci might have seen her."

They walked as rapidly as they could, stopping to ask everyone that they met if a woman carrying a child had been seen that way.

"No'm," was the answer given, curtly, curiously, or indifferently, as the case might be.

"If another person says 'no'm,' I shall yell," Margery cried at length. "Do you suppose that child was telling the truth?"

They turned to look at the girl, who still followed them at a discreet distance.

"She spoke as though she were," Polly insisted. "Thank goodness, there's the Buccis' now. And there is Mrs. Bucci sitting on the steps."

A turn in the road brought them close to the little house of the Buccis'. A group of women were clustered about the steps where Mrs. Bucci sat enthroned like a tragedy queen. At the sight of the two girls she went through her usual ceremony of throwing her apron over her head and bursting into tears.

"Oh, dear, Polly—she thinks we have come to bring her some more money—she goes through this performance every time Mother goes near her."

"Oh, Mrs. Bucci," Polly questioned eagerly, paying no attention to the signals of grief. "Have you seen a woman and a baby—a little girl of about three?"

Mrs. Bucci lowered a corner of the apron. "I ain't seen nobody," she wailed.

"Nobody," echoed the women.

"Sure you haven't seen anyone?" Margery insisted. "Please tell us if you have. We're looking for a little girl that has run away."

A younger woman drew near from the outer fringe of the group. "I seen da woman," she said with a flash of pretty white teeth. " She go to the clothing settlement."

" Oh, thank you so much. Come, Margery, we had better go on then."

" Why do you suppose all those women were there? " asked Margery.

" Oh, just gossiping. They talk, and talk."

Margery was silent. The hasty walk had tired her and she began to worry as to how she was going to go further. Yet she felt that she must not desert Polly.

" Where are you going, Polly? " she faltered.

" Why, to the clothing settlement, of course. Did you hear that girl say she saw the woman going in that direction? It was probably someone who lives there and who had found Lucy."

" Do you suppose we have to go there—couldn't we go back to the Inn and get a cab, or send somebody? "

" Oh, you blessed chicken! Of course you're tired out. I forgot that you're not strong now. Do you think that you can walk back to the lake? "

"I'm—I'm pretty tired. But of course we ought to get Lucy."

"We ought to make that awful nurse find her," Polly said wrathfully. "I hope Mrs. Stenton gives her an awful lecture."

She looked searchingly at Margery. "You do look tired," she said. "I wonder how we'll get you back to the lake. It's rather a walk yet."

She stopped and thought, tapping her lips with her finger. Margery sat down on the grassy bank of the road. A rickety old carriage drawn by an ancient white horse came down the road toward them.

"Oh, hello, Mike," Polly called to the boy driver. "Have you seen a woman or a baby?"

Mike grinned and shook his head.

"Mike, can you drive us back to the lake?"

Mike shook his head again. "My father he wants me right away to help him," he grinned.

Polly put her hand on the wheel. "I tell you what we'll do—you go and help your father, and let me have this horse and carriage." She felt she would prefer the carriage without Mike.

Mike found her idea an excellent joke.

" I mean it. Your father knows who I am. He serves vegetables to my mother at Pine Cottage. If you tell him that I promise to pay him well, it will be all right. Got any money, Marge? "

Margery searched through her sweater pockets. " Here's seventy-five cents," she said. " Oh, wait a minute—here's another quarter."

" There, Mike, there's a dollar. That's more than that old rattle-trap is worth an hour. Now tell your father that you know me at school and that it is all right. You can come to Pine Cottage for it in an hour, or I'll bring it to you."

Looking rather dazed, the boy climbed down and handed the reins to Polly.

" My father, he'll beat me," he grinned.

" No, he won't. Tell him Mrs. Morris's daughter was tired out, and that we'll pay him extra if necessary. Come on, Margery, I'm going to drive you home. But we'll stop at the clothing settlement first."

CHAPTER XX

THROUGH THE WOODS

"Well, I'm glad that we didn't attempt to walk it," Margery remarked after they had gone along some time in anxious silence. "It seems to me that it takes forever for us to get there. Are you sure that you know the right way to go?"

"I don't know exactly the way, but I know it's out this road somewhere."

"I don't believe that Ada and the others walk this far to school every day!"

"Oh, they don't come this way—they take a short cut through the woods. That takes off a mile or two, I guess. But it's a narrow path, I know, and even if we knew the way we couldn't take a carriage through there."

The road grew narrower and began to wind through the woods.

"I don't believe that this is the right way, Polly. It would be awfully easy to be lost in these woods."

"Wouldn't it though! But I'm sure we're right this time. I think, though, that we have taken the roundabout way—there's a shorter road, I'm sure. We'll take that going back."

The woods grew denser, and in spite of the brave front she showed, Polly began to be worried. "If we don't find that settlement pretty soon, we'll have to turn around and go back. Perhaps they have found the baby playing peacefully about the cottage, anyway."

"I believe that we are off on a wild-goose chase! Oh, there are some houses!—See! I can just catch a glimpse of them through the trees."

Polly was relieved. "I certainly am glad to get somewhere at last. But I don't believe that we will find little Lucy here. For if that woman carrying the child *had* been coming here—unless she had taken the other road—we would have passed her long ago."

"Still, as we are here, we might as well ask. I don't believe in leaving a stone unturned—when you turn it over so easily."

They drove past several comfortable little homes, and a long low building that was evidently the clothing factory. From several of the houses came the sound of a victrola, but no one seemed to be about, except a couple of children who waved delightedly when they recognized Polly, but who only stared when she asked them if they had seen a woman carrying a baby.

" It seems so silly to knock at any of these doors and ask them if they have seen little Lucy. I wonder if we ought to do it. Oh, look, Polly, there are some people on the porch of that house down there. We might ask them."

There was a noisy group on the front porch of the largest of the houses, evidently, to judge from the wildly flourished hands and excited voices, in the midst of an argument.

Polly stopped in front of the gate and Margery, although she volunteered to get out and ask the members of the group if they had happened to see little Lucy, felt somewhat hesitant.

" Oh," she exclaimed, one foot out over the wheel, " why, there's Ada! Ada," she called. " Oh, come here a moment, I want to speak to you."

Reluctantly, Ada left the group and came down the path to the gate. “What-y-want?” she asked indifferently.

“Oh, Ada, have you seen a woman and a little girl—a baby, really, of about three? Mrs. Stenton’s adopted baby is lost, and we can’t find her. Someone told us on the back road at the lake that she had seen a woman carrying a baby that must have been little Lucy. We’ve traced her in this direction. Have you seen her?”

Ada looked startled. “Mrs. Stenton’s little girl lost?” she exclaimed. “Little Lucy? No,” she said decidedly, “no, I haven’t seen her. No, I don’t know nothing about it! You needn’t come asking me!”

“I supposed we were on a wild-goose chase,” Polly said, gathering up the reins. “I think we had better get back. Perhaps they have found her.”

“It took us forever to get here, Ada,” Margery added. “Isn’t there a shorter way to get back to the lake?”

“Of course. You’re right near the lake. You came on the road from the Buccis’—that’s the long road. There’s a quick way right through the woods. You go around back of that building there—that's the factory—and you'll see another road that looks as though it hadn't been travelled very much. Turn down that to the right, and then turn down the first road to the left and that brings you right out by the lake."

"Straight down the crooked lane and all around the square," laughed Margery. "Thank you, Ada. Do you know, Polly, I'm sure that we'll find Lucy when we get back. I think we just got rather hysterical. I think we had better hurry back or they'll be worried about *us!*"

"Yes, indeed. Well, we'll be back in about fifteen minutes, if it takes us even that long."

They jogged down the narrow leafy lane as fast as the old horse could be persuaded to go. "It's going to rain, too," Polly exclaimed. "I felt a drop on my cheek. Hurry, old dear,"—to the horse.

"Polly," Margery suddenly exclaimed, "did it seem queer to you that Ada seemed to know who Mrs. Stenton is, and that the baby's name is Lucy?"

"That's so! How do you suppose she knew? Unless she just takes a great interest in all our affairs. You know how 'nosey,' as Deborah used to call it, some people are."

"How soon do you suppose do we come to that road toward the lake? Oh, there it is. Don't forget to turn down, Polly."

Polly turned the horse into another and narrower road. The rain was spattering down now on the leafy greenness around them.

"I'm glad that we have on our coats and tams—it's only a shower, though."

"Polly, did Ada say turn to the right or left?"

"She said the left first," answered Polly, confidently, "and then to the right."

"I was rather thinking it was the other way, and wondering if we ought to have come down this road."

"No, I'm sure we're right. And see, there's the road to the right ahead of us. We'll turn down that."

Had their minds been less on getting back to Pine Cottage, the girls would have thrilled to the beauty of the woods, now misty green in the softly falling rain. On each side of them stretched great masses of pink and white laurel, and in the open places was the blue of lupin. The air was filled with cool, wet woodsy smells, mingled with the sweet fern and the haunting perfume of magnolia and wild grape. A veery added his wild sweet notes to the music of the pattering raindrops.

Margery turned up her coat collar. "It seems to me it takes a long time to get to the lake," she remarked.

"Yes," Polly answered anxiously. "I'm afraid that you'll take cold. But we ought to be there any minute. Remember how we never thought we'd get to the settlement."

They jogged along in silence. It seemed rather lonely and eerie in the woods, and both girls felt that they would be glad when they were safely home. By this time they were both persuaded that little Lucy had been found.

"Oh, there's some houses. We're almost home now. It won't take a minute now to get to the cottage," cried Margery, delightedly pointing to some buildings they could see through the trees.

"Thank goodness," breathed Polly. "I really was getting a little worried."

She touched up the old horse with the frayed whip. “This must be the part of Pine Lake that lies back of the Inn,” she observed. “I’ve never seen it before. We’ll stop in at the Inn to get an umbrella.”

They passed a tumble-down house or two, then came abruptly into a settlement. There was a public square with a weather-beaten cast-iron statue in the center, faced by a store with broken porch and gaping windows. Beyond stood a mansion, tall weeds in its front yard, and a hawk perched in one of its broken fire-blackened windows. On the opposite side of the square twenty or thirty houses were scattered along two small streets, houses with falling chimneys and glassless windows. There was not a sound save the falling of the rain and the hoof-beats of the horse.

“Polly,” Margery gasped, “there isn’t anybody about.”

Polly laughed rather tremulously. “It’s a deserted village,” she said. “I’ve heard of it. Don’t be scared. We’ll just have to go back to the clothing settlement and get Ada to show us the way to the lake.”

She drove around the square, past the mouldering houses, the empty windows of which seemed like horrible sightless eyes, back to the woodland road.

"As soon as we come to the crossroads we'll have a better road and not these awful old tree-roots to go over—then we can go faster. So cheer up, Marge," Polly comforted. "Wasn't that deserted village scary? I've heard of it before. There was a glass factory or something there, and the owner lived in that big house where that bird was perched on the window-frame like some awful bird of ill-omen in a story. The owner failed and moved away, and the whole village finally was deserted. But we're not very far from home, so we'll be all right. I hope you're not damp enough from the rain to take cold."

"Oh, no, it hasn't gone through this heavy coat. Don't worry, I'm all right."

But they drove along in silence after that, both too anxious to feel much like talking. It stopped raining, but the day grew darker and the woods seemed to close in tighter about them.

"Polly," said Margery at last, "where's that crossroads where we turn?"

"I don't understand why it takes so long to come to it myself. Whoa! Whoa!" The horse had shied at a rabbit.

On and on they drove. The birds grew silent, and there was no sound but the sighing of the wind in the trees, the footfalls of the horse, and the creaking of the old harness.

"Polly, where is that crossroads? Besides, look! We didn't pass that before!"

In front of them was a black and gloomy swamp, where giant old gum-trees reared their dead limbs. At the sound of the carriage there was a harsh rasping cry and a great heron spread wide gray wings and rose from the marsh.

"Margery—I've been afraid to tell you! I don't know where we are. We're lost!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE EMPTY HUT

THE girls turned white and frightened faces toward each other.

"What shall we do?" asked Margery breathlessly.

Polly settled back with a long sigh, her hands with the reins lying limply in her lap. "There's nothing to do," she said. "We'll just have to keep on. Just follow this road. Perhaps after a while we may come to a house, or we'll come out of the woods or something."

"We must have turned away from the lake instead of going toward it," said Margery, struggling to keep her lips from trembling. "Well, I suppose that some day we may think this a killing adventure—but it doesn't seem quite so funny now."

On and on they drove through the long

spring dusk. The character of the woods seemed to change, the trees grew taller, and there was less underbrush.

It grew darker and an owl hooted.

Margery tried to laugh. "I do hate owls in woods," she faltered.

"Margery," Polly exclaimed suddenly, "look, there's a house ahead! See!"

As they drew near Margery held her breath. Might not a house, and people, be worse than the deserted woods? What menace did it hold?

But the house was empty.

"I wonder," said Polly, doubtfully.

"I wonder," Margery took up her words, "if we hadn't better stop here. It's getting darker every minute. And we can't go on driving all night. Hadn't we better take shelter?"

A broken-down table on which a dusty cup was standing was all the furniture in the one small room that comprised the first floor of the hut. In one corner lay a pile of empty sacks. The roof was broken and through it Margery could see the evening star.

"Wouldn't it be awful," Margery thought, more frightened by the unkempt place than by the clean and empty woods, mysterious though they were, "if this were a robber den? But we simply can't go wandering on all night."

The horse was carefully backed into the thicket and tied, and the girls brought the moth-eaten cushion from the carriage, and putting it in the corner sat on it with their backs against the wall.

"There's nothing to do but to wait until morning," said Polly.

"It's pretty cold," shivered Margery.

It grew darker. Blackness crept in and filled the corners of the room with dread. Outside the breeze died away and there was nothing to break the stillness but the occasional sound of the horse pawing the ground or jerking at the rope that tied him to the tree.

Suddenly they heard a long, rasping rustle in the grass and dead leaves outside the door. They started and gripped each other with icy hands. Slowly the rustling seemed to pass the door and be lost in the forest.

"It was a snake, I think," breathed Polly.

Silence settled down again, and the girls crouched closer together. "Whippoorwill," called a bird from the thicket.

It grew colder, and the dampness seemed to creep in about them. Margery's throat ached and she felt chilled to the bone.

The moon rose, and shining in at the door, made the corners blacker than ever. Again there was a rustling outside, low, furtive, as though someone with infinite caution were stealing closer, closer. Margery pressed her knuckles against her lips to keep from crying out.

"It's only a mouse, I think," whispered Polly.

That sound, too, passed away into the forest, and becoming half accustomed to their strange surroundings, the girls grew drowsy. Suddenly Margery sat upright and gripped Polly's arm.

Something was coming toward them through the bushes. They could hear the snapping of twigs, and the sound of slow, cautious footsteps on the dry leaves. The horse whinnied.

"It *is* something, Margery, it is!"

Slowly the door pushed open, and something long and brown crept in and darted toward them. With a scream the girls sprang to their feet. Its eyes blazing in the moonlight, the animal stopped and snarled.

Polly seized the cushion and with it struck at the animal. Still snarling, the creature retreated.

Again she struck, and again, and again it retreated.

Suddenly it whirled and dashed through the doorway.

Faintly, Polly closed the door and leaned against it. " I don't know which is worse," she faltered, " to be shut up in the darkness here, or to have all sorts of things wandering in."

" They are only woods things," said Margery bravely. " That was a weasel, I suppose, or a marten. Perhaps its home is in here."

They put the cushion down again. " Slip off your coat, Margie," suggested Polly, as she sank down in the corner. " I've read somewhere that if you wrap a coat over you it's warmer than if you wear it."

" We'll sit very close together, and spread both our coats over us."

Clasped in each other's arms and with the coats over them, they grew rather more comfortable. Their weary young frames relaxed and they slipped off into sleep.

When Margery woke the little cabin was filled with a grayish light. For a moment she sat dazed, wondering where she was and what had happened.

" Oh," she exclaimed, " oh! "

She stretched her cramped arms. " Polly," she ordered, " wake up! It's morning."

Polly opened her eyes. " What's the matter? " she asked indifferently. " Oh! "

" It's morning now. Don't you think that we had better start now? We've simply got to keep on until we get to some kind of a settlement! They'll be frantic about us at home."

Stiff from their sleep in a cramped position, the girls got up and opened the door.

There was a faint rosy glow in the east and the birds were twittering. A white mist hung in the hollows, and the air was damp and chill.

" The sun will be up before long," said Polly, drawing her coat tighter about her. " So we might as well start now."

Margery swayed a little and caught hold of a bush for support. She felt faint from cold and hunger.

"Yes. Let's start right away. We may not be so awfully far from the lake—and I'm terribly hungry. And I just don't care to think how Mother is worrying."

They crossed the half-obliterated road to the thicket where they had fastened the horse.

"Margery," asked Polly with an anxious frown, "wasn't this the place where we tied that horse?"

"I thought it was. But it was pretty dark. It must have been further on."

They pushed on, the underbrush tearing at their hair and slapping in their faces.

At length they turned and stared at each other with frightened eyes.

The horse was gone.

CHAPTER XXII

LOST

"WELL," said Polly, weakly, "I suppose we'll have to walk."

"That old horse is so slow that we may catch up to him," returned Margery. She glanced again at Polly's downcast face and suddenly went into peals of laughter. Leaning against a pine sapling she laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Polly seized her by one slender shoulder and shook her. "Margery, stop it," she commanded. "You're getting hysterical."

"Well, it is funny," Margery defended herself.

Her laughter stopping as suddenly as it had begun, Margery wiped her eyes and crashed through the undergrowth back to the narrow road.

"It's all so silly," she said faintly. "It seems like some weird nightmare. First the man stealing that ladder night before last. And then Lucy lost. And then our getting that old horse, and being lost. And that awful weasel thing! And now the horse is gone!"

At the thought, Margery threatened to go off into peals of laughter again.

"Come on," Polly said abruptly, seizing Margery by the arm. "We can't stand here giggling all day. We'll have to start. It's no use going back the way we came, either. We'll just have to push on."

"Perhaps we'll find the horse—he may have wandered into some thicket farther back from the road."

"Not with the carriage," declared Polly briefly.

The faint rosy glow in the east had changed to brilliant scarlet and yellow, and a few minutes later they could see the sun between the tall black trunks of the pine-trees, a great crimson ball. The white mist lifted, and the sun shining on the drops left hanging on every twig and delicate green leaf turned them to jewels. The air grew less chill, and was filled with all the sweet wood fragrances. The birds twittered and called, and from a low bush near them a song-sparrow suddenly burst into a wild sweet hymn of happiness.

The sandy road skirted a silent cedar-water stream, and the girls stopped to drink of its clear, slightly pungent water and to bathe their faces and hands.

"If only we could find some berries or something to eat," sighed Polly. "But I suppose that it is too early for anything yet. I'm so hungry!"

"So am I."

They plodded on, trying to hide from each other their utter dismay. The pine-needles covering the sandy road made it slippery, and here and there, where a little stream would overflow, it was boggy and they would have to make a wide detour. Once they had difficulty in finding the road again and wandered breathlessly through the thickets, their hands and faces stabbed by the sharp points of the holly leaves and the barbs of the greenbrier that twined itself over everything.

"There are fresh hoof-prints here," said Margery, stopping to look at one of the swampy places in the road. "That old horse must have come this way."

"Anyway, this road must have been used some time and lead somewhere or it wouldn't exist at all. That's a comfort."

Courageously they plodded on, following the road which grew narrower and rougher. Margery found herself getting tired beyond measure. Her back and head ached, her eyes throbbed, she felt chilled and faint from lack of food. The tears came very near the surface, but she choked them back bravely, lest Polly should see and be disheartened.

Polly, striding along ahead of her, suddenly seemed to her to be hard and indifferent.

" She's strong and well, and she's not feeling exhausted, or even thinking that I may be," she thought, too tired to take a normal view.

To comfort herself and bolster her own courage she said aloud:

" Perhaps we are very near the lake, and are just wandering around it in a circle. I've heard of people wandering about all night when they were really only ten yards from their homes and didn't know it."

" That's when people are lost in blizzards and can't see because of the snow."

How queer Polly's voice sounded, Margery thought. She ran a few steps forward and caught up to Polly.

"Why, Polly, you're crying! We mustn't give in yet. Perhaps we aren't nearly as much lost as we think we are!"

"It's—it's just that I've got you in this scrape. And you'll go and take cold and die! And your mother will be worried to death! and I know Mother is frantic—she has so much, it seems too bad she should have this fresh trouble."

Margery summoned all her composure. The thought of her mother's anxiety was almost more than she could bear. "I'm not going to die," she declared emphatically. "But I am going to sit down and rest for a few minutes. So are you! I'm used up."

They sat down on a bed of brilliant green moss under a giant old pine-tree. Near them a tiny stream crooned over the tree-roots that ridged its bed, and a tall sweet-bay, crowned with waxy white fragrant blossoms, swayed in the light breeze. A scarlet tanager perched on one of the branches, brilliant against the gray-green leaves.

Margery turned her eyes from it indifferently. "To think," she sighed, "that there are people who have had beefsteak for breakfast."

"Yes, and I suppose that there are lots of times when we have had beefsteak and haven't cared about it, other people were starving. I suppose there are lots of people often just as hungry as we are now."

For the first time in their lives hunger had become a real and vital thing.

"That's what makes Ada so bitter sometimes, perhaps. She had known people who were really hungry."

They got to their feet and went on. They walked more slowly now and every step seemed an effort. Margery's knees trembled so that she could scarcely stand, and Polly's heart seemed to her to be sticking in her throat. By the position of the sun they knew that it must be nearing noon, and the fear clutched them both that night might again overtake them before they were out of the woods.

"Margery," Polly faced Margery bravely, "I don't want to worry you. But this road is growing narrower and narrower, and I'm horribly afraid that it is going to stop all together pretty soon. But perhaps we'll find a crossroads."

Margery squared her shoulders and took a long breath. "Polly, there is nothing to do but to be brave and keep on. If we turned around and went back we wouldn't be any better off. Don't you remember the story of the two frogs that fell into a pail of milk? One gave in and was drowned, the other kicked and kicked. Finally his kicking churned the milk to butter and he hopped out. We'll have to be like that frog."

Polly sighed, half in admiration, half in utter fatigue.

"You always were a plucky little thing," she said.

They went on again in silence, too tired to waste their breath in speech.

The road wound on through monotonous woodland. Once they thought that they were coming out into the open country, but it proved to be only a waste place where fire had swept. Again they thought that they heard the sound of voices, but it was only crows cawing in some old dead gum-trees in a swamp.

"Polly," Margery cried at last, "I'll have to sit down and rest again. I feel so queer. Here's a log where we can rest."

They threw themselves down, and Polly took off her shoe. "There's a pebble in it," she explained.

"Polly! What's that? Don't you hear something?"

"Oh, it's just some more crows."

"No. It's something coming!"

From far away they could hear voices and the creak of wagon wheels in need of oiling.

"Someone is coming! Oh, Polly, thank goodness!"

But Polly drew Margery down behind a thickly flowering laurel bush. "We don't know who they may be," she whispered. "I've been scared to death for fear we might meet some gypsies, or something like that!"

The voices grew nearer and they could hear the thud of a horse's hoofs on the sandy road.

Suddenly Margery raised her head.

"It's Ada! I hear her voice! Ada!" she cried, running out in front of the approaching wagon. "Oh, Ada!"

There was an answering cry, and Ada sprang down from the seat beside the driver.

"Oh, Margery, we've been looking for you almost all night! Where have you been? And your mother is so frightened!"

"I don't know," Margery answered, rather wildly, "we've been so far, and the horse got untied and got away! And, oh, Ada, I'm so hungry."

Polly leaned limply against the wagon-wheel. "If you were angels we couldn't be any gladder to see you," she said.

"We hunt and hunt for you," said the boy who was driving.

Polly looked up at him. "Why—why, you're Angelo Bucci!"

The boy laughed and jumped down. "Here," he said, picking Margery up as though she were a child, and plumping her down into the wagon, "you girls can sit on the back seat."

"Are you hungry?" asked Ada, giving Polly a boost.

Polly paused with one foot on the hub of the wheel. "We're starved."

Ada held out a huge, battered piece of bread and butter. "Saved that in case we found you." And Margery and Polly, fastidious as they were, took it and divided it between them thankfully.

"Your mothers is awful scared," said Ada as Angelo Bucci backed the wagon into the bushes and turned it round. "And—and," she hesitated, evidently disliking to express her feelings, "I was too."

"Oh, please hurry," Margery urged the boy, "I want to get home as soon as I can and let Mother know that we're all right. Are we far from home?"

"Pretty far," Ada answered. "You must have taken the wrong turn. You didn't go the way like I told you to, or else you wouldn't have been lost."

"And Lucy?" put in Polly. "Did they find Lucy?"

Ada's sallow face turned crimson and she bit her lip.

"Yes," she answered in a low voice. "Yes, they found her yesterday."

Angelo Bucci turned and faced them squarely. "She," with a jerk of his thumb toward Ada, "made him take her back."

"Made who?"

"My fadder."

"Your father? What had *he* to do with it? He's away, anyway."

"He came back."

"Lucy is Angelo's cousin," Ada put in.

"Angelo's cousin?"

"My fadder he gave Lucia to Mrs. Stenton."

"Oh," said Margery blankly. She was so utterly thankful just to sit still and rest and feel that she was going nearer to her mother with every step of the horse that it was hard for her to quite grasp what was being said.

"She was the baby of my aunt who died," Angelo went on. "And then she come," jerking his thumb at Ada, "and she tell my mudder all the time that it was a wicked thing to give Lucia to Mrs. Stenton. My mudder, she's silly," he added with startling frankness, "she's awful silly, and she believe her."

"But why," Polly interrupted, "shouldn't Mrs. Stenton adopt Lucy?"

"She's rich. And Ada she tell my mudder that the rich always make a slave of the poor, and that she'll kill little Lucia's soul. My fadder and I, we tell her different, but she would not believe us, she believes Ada all the time."

Neither Polly nor Margery made any comment. They knew poor, silly, stupid Mrs. Bucci, and they knew that Ada had all the gifts of persuasion and suggestion of the born agitator. They knew, too, something of her restless malice and desire for excitement.

"And then we have trouble and my fadder he does not have enough shoes to mend to pay the rent. And then my mudder she thinks it is a curse because we give Lucia to Mrs. Stenton."

"Oh, Ada," exclaimed Polly, "how could you make her think that?"

"Mr. Bucci cheated my father over a pair of shoes," answered Ada sullenly.

"Oh, Ada," Margery cried indignantly, "how could you be so revengeful?"

Ada hung her head and made no answer.

But the Bucci boy was too much interested in the story of his own troubles to pay any attention to Ada or to the girls' attitude toward her.

"And my mudder she talked and talked all the time to my fadder that it was a curse until he get mad and go away. Then we were worse off than before."

"And then," Ada cut in, eager to justify herself, "when he had stolen little Lucy, I knew where he was and I made my father go to him and tell him that he would have the police and the bloodhounds put after him if he did not take Lucy back right away to Mrs. Stenton. And he did. But if it had not been for me he would have taken little Lucy to the woods and hidden her, and he would have made Mrs. Stenton give him money, but he would not have given her Lucy."

Angelo demurred. "My fadder he's honest," he protested. "He just get mad at my mudder."

Margery and Polly were silent. It was hard for them to grasp the meaning of the drama that had been played about them.

Suddenly Polly leaned forward and put her hand on Ada's arm.

"Ada," she demanded, "do you know if he tried to get Lucy before? If he tried to climb up to her room with a ladder and get her that way?"

"Yes, and you poured water on him. And

when you were lost in the woods, I was afraid that he had paid you back some way."

Angelo protested again. "My fadder he's honest," he declared angrily.

They turned down a crossroads and a few minutes later had come out at the far end of the lake.

Margery looked at its waters shining in the warm spring sunshine. "I had begun to think that we were never going to see that again," she said softly.

Polly laughed. She was radiantly happy now. In a few minutes more she would see her mother, little Lucy was safe, and the adventure in the woods, now that it was triumphantly over, seemed almost an experience worth having. "We were much nearer home than we thought. We would have got here after a while, if we had just kept on. That certainly shows the advantages of keeping on!"

Far down the road they could see two figures standing with their hands over their eyes as they gazed into the distance.

"Oh, Polly, it's our mothers! They are waiting. They don't know we are coming."

Margery stood up, and holding on to Ada's shoulder, waved violently.

Faint from excitement and lack of food, a mist rose blackly before her eyes.

"You mustn't faint," she scolded herself. "You mustn't!"

Suddenly the shoulder against which she leaned seemed to slip from her grasp and there was a stifled exclamation. The mist cleared and she leaned over the front seat to see what had happened.

Ada had fainted.

THE OLD WHITE BOAT WAS LADEN WITH BOYS AND GIRLS.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST EVENING

THE old white boat belonging to the Inn was laden with boys and girls and wild flowers. Margery, perched in the bow, had almost disappeared behind masses of fragrant wild honeysuckle, gorgeous Turk's cap lilies, and tall cinnamon fern. In the stern, Polly and Esther held between them a basket filled with fragrant white water-lilies, and at their feet was another basket of delicate ferns and the odd pale-emerald and deep russet flowers of the pitcher-plant.

Margery, leaning from the bow, caught a water-lily by its stem, plucked it, and deftly tossed it over the heads of Dick and Sam at the oars, to the girls in the stern.

" Did you ever see so many lilies? " she exclaimed. " Think of all that we will have to take home to Renwyck's Town! "

Dick turned to look at her. " You look

like a queen of the May with all those flower things about you."

"It certainly will be a case of 'call me early, Mother dear,'" she laughed. "Do you realize that we start for Renwyck's Town to-morrow at half-past seven? Home again! Think of it!"

It was her last afternoon at Pine Lake. Dick and Sam, with Esther and Deborah Davis, had motored over from Renwyck's Town and were staying at the Inn. When they went back the next morning, Margery and her mother were to go with them.

"To think that our stay here is over. In some ways I'll be sorry to leave this," and Margery nodded at the gleaming water-lilies spread on either side of the boat and the tall pine-trees that almost encircled the little cove into which they had drifted.

"Tell us some more about Ada," suggested Esther.

They had been speaking earlier of the night Polly and Margery had been lost in the woods, and of how Ada had searched for them.

"There isn't much more to tell," Margery said, "except that she really seems to have been terribly upset over her part in the stealing of little Lucy. And she was frightened to death for fear that the Bucci man had revenged himself on us."

They all laughed as they thought of Margery's encounter with Angelo's father.

"He certainly must have been surprised when the water came down on his head," Dick commented.

"And did Ada really faint?" asked Esther. "That seems hard to believe!"

"She really did," Polly assured her, looking up from the pitcher-plant she had been examining. "She had been thoroughly frightened and upset over the whole thing, you know."

"She is such an intense creature," Margery explained. "She feels everything so. Grandpapa has taken quite an interest in her. He says such a person is bound to be a force either for good or bad. And she certainly does have a wonderful influence over the other girls and boys. He wants to help her to be a force for good, so he had offered to give her whatever education she wants."

"She really seems to be fond of Margery," Polly remarked, "and anxious to please her."

"She counts us in with the 'rich' that she is always denouncing," laughed Margery, "and I think that it is something of a shock to her to discover that we're just like other people. She felt all Americans were some queer sort of cold-blooded monsters whose chief pleasure was tormenting poor foreigners."

"I wonder what kind of a paper she will read to-night," said Dick.

Margery reached for another water-lily. "I do hope," she said anxiously, "that it will be something that will help to make the others good Americans. She has such an influence over them!"

There was to be a community party at the schoolhouse that evening. Through Mr. Beacon's interest and efforts the schoolhouse had been repainted and papered, and made into a pleasant cheerful place that could serve as a community club-house after school hours. The fathers and mothers of the young students, and the members of the school board and their wives were to be there at the party, and Mrs. Morris had kept her promise, made half in jest on the day of the trip to Philadelphia, to offer a prize for the best paper on patriotism. The papers were to be read that evening and the prize awarded.

"I don't believe that Ada will say anything very bitter," said Polly. "When she won the prize for finding the names of the most people who had achieved success in spite of obstacles, and Mrs. Morris asked her what book she wanted, she chose a life of Lincoln. I don't believe that anybody can go very far wrong who tries to live up to Lincoln."

"My string of beads isn't nearly as long as Ada's," said Margery to Polly later in the afternoon. "But it means a lot to me." She touched each bead softly as she counted. "Lincoln, Louisa Alcott, Beethoven, Prescott, Heine, Pope, Pascal, Helen Keller, all of them have fought through some sorrow or drawback. Doesn't that make you feel humble, lady? It does me."

She crossed the room to Polly, who was standing by the window looking out at the lake, and put her arm about her shoulders. Together they stood silently watching the lengthening shadows of the pine-trees as they crept across the lake. In a week or two, Polly and her mother would follow the Morrises back to Renwyck's Town. Anxiety had lifted from their lives; Mrs. Jameson had been persuaded by Mrs. Stenton to become chaperone in her famous school in New York, and Polly had been given a scholarship there.

Margery broke the silence. "Isn't it wonderful," she said, giving Polly's shoulder a tighter grip, "to think that we'll be together next winter, too! I'm so glad that Mother has decided to send me to Mrs. Stenton's school that I don't know what to do."

"Do you remember, old lady, how discouraged we were a while ago? It seemed as though you'd never get well and strong, and thought I'd be stuck down here for the rest of my natural life. And now you're well! Wasn't it funny the way you seemed to get well all at once?"

"And the way has opened for you to be at school and still with your mother. And then, you know, Grandpapa is going to give a scholarship to Westover College and you are to have it for the first four years."

Polly sighed. "It seems almost too good to be true. And Miss Stanley—do you remember how I detested her at first?—has sent some of my nature stories for tiny children to an editor she knows, and she thinks she can get me some writing of that kind to do."

"Oh, Polly! How perfect! Doesn't it just show that if you keep on walking long enough you'll get out of the woods sometime?"

They turned for a final look at the lake and the setting sun behind the pine-trees, then they went down-stairs to join the others.

The schoolhouse was already filled when the party from the Inn arrived. Angelo's parents were there and Ada's, very proud and smiling, and Rosa Bonini, slipping her hand into Margery's, pointed proudly to a pretty little woman as "me mudder."

"Do you know, Esther," Margery whispered, "I have an idea that Ada is going to get the prize. Oh, Esther, there comes Mr. Beacon! Where's Deborah? Quick."

She linked her arm with Deborah's and drew her forward. "Mr. Beacon," she said, trying to be calm and dignified, "I want you to meet a very dear friend of ours, Miss Davis. We think it would be so nice if you and she and our friend Dick Ball would act as judges for the papers on patriotism."

There was a low, "Why, George Beacon!" and a delighted, "Well, Debby!" and Margery slipped away, her face beaming.

The judges were conducted to the platform, and Margery and Polly, laughing to see Dick's expression of annoyed perplexity at the honor thrust upon him, took their places between Mrs. Morris and Esther.

Rosa Bonini mounted the platform and commenced to read her paper in her soft sweet voice. Margery was dimly conscious that it was a tribute to the flag. "My flag is the American flag. It was born in freedom and honor, and I must always try to guard its honor, and help it to stand for freedom." But it was too absorbing to watch Deborah's sweet face, with its expression of gentle happiness, and Mr. Beacon's smiling countenance, brimful of delight.

"I know Rosa's paper is good; Polly helped her," she whispered to Esther. "But I just can't listen! Do look at Deborah and Mr. Beacon!"

Rosa finished and sat down, and Margery

applauded as enthusiastically as though she had heard every word.

There was a stir in the room, and Margery saw that Ada was moving toward the platform. She carried her head high and there was a flush on her usually sallow cheeks.

Margery sat forward in her chair, tense. She glanced at Dick; he, too, was watching Ada intently. A queer little thrill passed over her and she gripped Polly's hand.

What was Ada going to say? Would she spell discouragement for them; prove to them that they lacked the power to show her what was best and most beautiful of America?

Ada stepped to the front of the platform. " Ladies, and gentlemen, and schoolmates," she began formally, " I have not prepared a paper to read to you."

She stopped. Margery sighed, disappointed.

" But," Ada went on with a reassuring nod to Margery, " I am going to recite to you the oath of loyalty which long ago the youths of the great city of Athens gave to it. It was this:

" ' We will never bring disgrace to this our city, by any act of dishonesty or cowardice, nor ever desert our comrades; we will fight for the ideals and sacred things of this city, both alone and with the many; we will revere and obey city laws, and do our best to incite a like respect in others; we will strive unceasingly to quicken the public's sense of civic duty; that thus in all these ways, we may transmit this city, greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.' "

She stopped again and there was silence in the little building. She stepped nearer the front of the platform, and again she looked at Margery.

"And now," she said slowly and clearly, "it is for us who are Americans to so serve America and obey its laws, that we may transmit it greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us."

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